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Monday, February 3, 2014

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FULL TEXT

The week ahead in the Legislature

Montgomery Advertiser

February 3, 2014

Brian Lyman

A look ahead at expected action this week in the Alabama Legislature. All events are subject to change.

House of Representatives

The House of Representatives is scheduled to convene at 1 p.m. Tuesday. House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, said they would work off the calendar Tuesday, with special order calendars coming as early as Wednesday. He said he hoped to get a bill from the Senate that would limit lobbying by former members of the Alabama Legislature, as well as legislation dealing with community college enrollment.

In committees:

- The House Military and Veterans Affairs committee is scheduled Wednesday to take up legislation sponsored by Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa, that would delete a wartime service requirement for scholarships available to veterans' spouses, widows or children. A Senate committee has passed similar legislation sponsored by Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville.
- The House Technology and Research committee is scheduled Wednesday to take up a bill sponsored by Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, that would make it a crime to make a patent infringement claim in bad faith. The Senate passed the bill last week.

Senate

The Senate is scheduled to convene at 2 p.m. Tuesday. Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said the chamber will take up sunset bills for various state agencies. Marsh also said he hopes to bring up his legislation limiting lobbying by former members of the Alabama Legislature, as well as a bill sponsored by Rep. Paul DeMarco, R-Homewood that would establish an independent court to hear tax appeals.

In committees:

- The Senate Judiciary committee Wednesday is scheduled to take up legislation from Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, aimed at strengthening the Open Meetings Law. Critics say recent Alabama Supreme Court decisions have all but gutted the law.
- The Senate Judiciary committee Wednesday is also scheduled to take up legislation sponsored by Sen. Paul Sanford, R-Huntsville, that would make medical necessity a defense in prosecutions over marijuana possession.
- A bill sponsored by Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville that would require able-bodied recipients of public assistance who are not working to perform community service is scheduled to appear in the Children, Youth and Human Resources committee Wednesday.

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Under the Dome: Lawmakers may revisit rules after losing days to winter weather

Montgomery Advertiser

February 3, 2014

Brian Lyman

Lawmakers said they had no choice but to convene last week, despite weather that virtually shut down the state. It's prompting discussion that the rules governing the Legislature should be changed to prevent it from happening again.

The House convened Tuesday with only 40 of the chamber's 102 members present, and adjourned for lack of a quorum. The Senate managed to meet Tuesday, but with only 22 of 35 members present. Leadership in both chambers urged members to stay home if the conditions were too treacherous. Still, the chambers themselves had to convene Tuesday.

That, said House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, was because the rules of the chamber do not allow leadership to change meeting dates after they have been set. The Alabama Constitution allows the governor to convene the Legislature outside Montgomery or move it to another location should it "become impossible or dangerous for the legislature to meet or remain at the Capitol," but is silent about whether anyone can change meeting times of the chambers because of emergencies.

In addition, the rules of the Legislature require the bodies to reconvene at 10 a.m. the following day, if no quorum is present. With roads still treacherous on Wednesday, both Hubbard and Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, decided to cancel legislative business, losing a legislative day.

"It's really something we never intended," Hubbard said Thursday. "The rule needs to be there, and there needs to be a rule (so) if there is a filibuster, you need to come back the next day."

Talk about making the change began Tuesday afternoon in the Senate, when Marsh and Senate Minority Leader Vivian Davis Figures, D-Montgomery, both said they were looking for ways to prevent lawmakers from coming to Montgomery during dangerous weather situations. Although the proposal is still being developed, Hubbard said Thursday he expected it to allow leadership to reschedule meeting days should the governor declare a state of emergency for the entire state.

Changing the rules requires the approval of four-fifths of the membership to take effect, but Hubbard said he expected the votes to be there.

"After seeing what happened this week, it can't happen (again)," he said. "It may not happen again for 50 years, but it's incumbent on us to have a rule in place."

Wren answers the call

Despite the cancellation of business Wednesday, the House was still technically in session, and there was a representative at the podium for the extremely brief meeting.

"We did open the House," said Rep. Greg Wren, R-Montgomery, on Thursday. "Clay Redden, assistant Clerk of the House, was present, I was present. Between the two of us, we went back and forth with the prayer and Pledge of Allegiance and roll call to establish a quorum, and there wasn't one. So that caused us to adjourn."

The “extensive prayer,” Wren said, called for aid for those impacted by the weather and for the efforts of first responders in the weather. The representative drove from his east Montgomery home to the chamber, saying it “took awhile to find roads that were passable.”

“Sometimes unique things like this happen in government,” he said. “We just have to operate as normal, even when things don’t appear that way.”

Montgomery or bust

Rep. Jim Patterson, R-Meridianville, left early enough for the session Tuesday that he avoided the worst of the weather and managed to be in Montgomery all three days this week.

It’s a more notable feat when you consider the Madison County representative lives closer to Tennessee’s capital of Nashville (90 miles away) than his own state’s (200 miles away).

“Our roads are open,” he said. “It’s really Cullman south where the problems are.”

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Senator calls for drug testing legislators

The Associated Press

February 1, 2014

Phillip Rawls

MONTGOMERY — With a first name like “Trip,” an Alabama senator was bound to prompt jokes by pushing a bill mandating drug testing for legislators.

But Sen. Trip Pittman says he’s serious.

“It’s a fairness issue,” the Republican from Daphne said.

Pittman said he proposed legislative drug testing after some lawmakers criticized a bill he introduced to require welfare applicants with a misdemeanor or felony drug conviction in the last five years to take a drug test. Anyone who failed three times would be denied benefits, but their children could receive them.

“We are willing to lead by example,” the senator said.

His welfare drug testing bill has been approved by a Senate committee and is waiting for a vote in the Senate. His legislative drug testing bill is awaiting a vote in committee.

Pittman acknowledges the bill needs some work before getting committee approval.

In one place, the bill provides for testing of legislators when there is a reasonable suspicion that a person might be using illegal drugs. In another place, the bill provides for drug testing of all

legislators at intervals the Legislature determines appropriate. Any legislator with a failing test would be referred to the House or Senate ethics committee, but there is no removal from office.

Pittman's bill is a proposed constitutional amendment that would have to pass the House and Senate and be approved by voters in a statewide referendum before taking effect. That referendum would coincide with this year's legislative elections.

Other senators say they will support the bill if it comes to a vote, but it is not on the priority bill lists of either the Senate or House Republican caucuses.

"I don't have a problem with it," Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said.

Marsh said the manufacturing business he used to own in Anniston had to perform drug testing to get certified by the Federal Aviation Administration. "As a business owner, I required it for my employees and myself for years," he said.

Democratic Sen. Bobby Singleton of Greensboro is among the senators who criticized Pittman's drug testing for welfare applicants. Singleton said if the state is going to test some welfare applicants, then it ought to test anyone who gets state assistance, including business owners who get tax breaks or financial incentives for locating factories in the state.

Singleton said he has no fear of a drug test. "I'm certain I'll pass it," he said. But he said he doesn't see any desire by the Legislature to do drug testing on members.

"It will never come to the ballot," he said.

In the House, Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, said Pittman hasn't discussed the bill with him.

Pittman's idea for drug testing is not new. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Kansas Legislature passed a law in 2013 for testing of its members and other key state officials, but implementation of the law has not been finalized.

In 2003, Louisiana repealed a law for random drug testing of elected officials, and in 1997, a Georgia law about drug tests for candidates was ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.

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Forestry industry: Bill will cost jobs

Times Daily

February 1, 2014

Mary Sell

MONTGOMERY — A bill in the Alabama Senate regarding environmentally friendly construction standards in public projects is pitting one of the state's oldest industries — forestry — against several others, including steel manufacturers.

At issue is the use of the Leadership in Energy and Environment Design certification, commonly called LEED, on government buildings.

On one side, the forest industry, still a large one in the state, says the LEED certification shuts out a majority of Alabama wood products.

"The crux of the problem is that taxpayer dollars are being used by state agencies to deny jobs to Alabama workers and sales to Alabama companies," said Chris Isaacson, executive vice president of the Alabama Forestry Association.

Isaacson's group is pushing Senate Bill 152, which would essentially end LEED certification on buildings paid for with public money, unless LEED makes more allowances for wood product certification.

"We are the original green industry in Alabama," Isaacson said. "Growing trees and turning them into products people use and then replanting them ... that's about as green as you get."

Opponents of the bill say throwing out the LEED certification now would be a waste.

Ernie Glenn, of the Alabama Iron and Steel Council, said many steel companies have put too much time and money into producing LEED-certifiable products to see the system ended on public projects.

"It goes against the hard work that the iron and steel industries, and many other industries in Alabama, have done to be part of what we think is a very sound and sensible procedure," Glenn said last week.

"In terms of our competitive future ... we are participants in a lot of public building projects, so the work and steps our companies took to become LEED certified have a part in their bottom lines and ability to continue to support jobs."

Meanwhile, the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that came up with LEED about 15 years ago says there is room for Alabama forestry products in the certification.

"As long as it comes from Alabama, it earns points," said Jeremey Sigmon, director of technical policy at the U.S. Green Building Council.

Throwing out LEED certification over concerns for one product doesn't make sense, he said.

"It's like demanding that we go back to rotary phones because you don't like an app on your smartphone," Sigmon said.

The bill

Senate Bill 152 is sponsored by Sen. Marc Keahey, D-Grove Hill. He says his bill would level the playing field for forestry in LEED certification.

It would do that by expanding from one to three the forest certification standards — the groups that certify the actual forests — allowed.

Currently, LEED uses the Forest Stewardship Council's standards. The problem, Isaacson said, is that only about 2 percent of Alabama forests are certified by that group.

Sustainable Forestry Initiative and American Tree Farm System are more popular in Alabama, but not recognized by LEED.

Until the other two certifications are recognized by LEED, Keahey wants it discontinued on state projects.

"(Forestry is) the second-largest industry in the state, and we shouldn't shut the door on our own, whether it be forestry or steel or what have you," he said.

"The detrimental effect that the current situation is having on the wood industry is far greater than the detrimental effect this legislation would have on the steel industry, in my opinion."

Steelmaker Nucor Corp., which has a site in Decatur, doesn't agree.

"The state's use of green building standards has helped level the playing field and guards against the use of cheaply made, inferior steel products from countries such as China, which are made with no regard for environmental laws and dumped in our market often at prices below what it costs U.S. companies to produce steel," Nucor spokeswoman Katherine Miller said in an emailed statement. "Unfortunately, SB 152 would prohibit the use of green building standards in state-funded construction projects, yet do little to accomplish its goal of incentivizing the use of Alabama forest products in state construction projects."

While lawmakers in Montgomery debate this bill — it has received committee approval and could come up for a Senate floor vote this week — Gov. Robert Bentley took a stand for foresters last year, when he signed an executive order regarding LEED certification.

Bentley's order stipulates green building standards used on state projects must give equal credentials to wood products certified under the three programs, not just the current one, and "must treat wood products fairly when compared with non-renewable materials."

It also stipulates state agencies are encouraged — but not required — to consider green building standards if they'll result in cost savings.

"Over 45,000 jobs are produced by the forest products industry in Alabama," Bentley said in a statement last week. "The goal of this executive order is to support products that are grown here in Alabama. By leveling the playing field among all third-party certified landowners, we will continue to support Alabama jobs and Alabama families."

Bentley's executive order is only good while he's in office.

"We have been working with the governor and his staff since last year ... to try to arrive at a solution that everyone can accept," said Glenn, of the iron and steel council.

National debate

Keahey said constituents in his forest-heavy south Alabama district made him aware of the issue and possible legislation. But other states have considered similar actions.

In December, the Associated Press reported lobby groups were asking Congress to ban the use of LEED in federal projects. In several states, including Maine, Georgia and Mississippi, LEED standards essentially have been banned in public construction.

North Carolina, Florida and, most recently Ohio, also have seen anti-LEED legislation.

Meanwhile, alternatives to LEED have emerged. Those who support the other, newer certification programs say LEED is too cumbersome; LEED supporters say the alternatives are too lax in their standards, the Associated Press reported.

For now, forestry industry leaders want LEED done away with in Alabama.

"As soon as LEED changes, all this controversy goes away, but as long as it discriminates, taxpayer dollars shouldn't be used to discriminate," Isaacson said.

What is LEED?

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design is a voluntary, third-party certification program run by the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council.

Building projects and renovations earn LEED points based on things such as sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency and materials selection. With enough points, the buildings are deemed LEED certified.

LEED in Alabama

As of January 2013, there were:

356 LEED-certified commercial buildings in the state;

124 LEED projects on existing buildings in the state, ranking Alabama 17th in the country;

307 LEED-certified homes in the state;

1,306 LEED-credentialed professionals in the state.

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Gov. Bentley: Cities and counties must pay storm costs out of pocket

Al.com

January 31, 2014

Kyle Whitmire

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- Cities and counties that incurred recovery costs from this week's snow storm will have to pay those costs out of pocket, Gov. Robert Bentley said Friday.

During other natural disasters, such as tornadoes and hurricanes, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has reimbursed local jurisdictions for cleanup costs, but this week's storm did not rise to the threshold to qualify for those funds, the governor said.

Earlier this week, the mayor of Leeds told AL.com that the state would pay for towing and impound costs, after the city directed towing companies to move abandoned cars from roadways there.

But the governor's office quickly replied, saying that no such agreement existed.

The Leeds City Council will vote tonight whether to pay for towing costs. Regardless, those funds are not coming from the state. It is up to local jurisdictions to set aside reserves for such emergencies, the governor said.

"They should, and they do, most of them," he said. "This will be up to them to take care of anything, any expenses that they incurred."

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Weed derivative could become legal

Decatur Daily

February 1, 2014

Mary Sell

MONTGOMERY — Legislation pending in the Statehouse would legalize the medical use of cannabidiol, an oil that comes from marijuana.

Unlike previous medical marijuana-related legislation, this one is sponsored by Republicans.

The bill from Sen. Paul Sanford, R-Huntsville, and Rep. Mike Ball, R-Madison, allows for cannabidiol use by patients with certain medical conditions and who were prescribed cannabidiol from a physician with whom they have a "bona fide physician-patient relationship."

Medical conditions outlined in the bill include seizures, severe or chronic pain and "any other condition that is severe and resistant to conventional medicine."

Senate Bill 174 is scheduled for a vote in the Senate Judiciary Committee this week. Under existing law, possession of marijuana for personal use is a Class A misdemeanor. This legislation would give cannabidiol users — as allowed in the bill — a legal defense from prosecution.

Rep. Patricia Todd, D-Birmingham, is a co-sponsor of the House bill. Todd previously has carried medical marijuana legislation, but has never gotten much traction.

"This is a very narrowly focused bill that's not as broad as mine in the past," Todd said. It doesn't open any floodgates to legalizing marijuana in general, she said.

"We have children that are suffering, and this bill will help them," she said. Meeting and talking with children who suffer from seizures that can be prevented with cannabidiol has gotten lawmakers' attention, Todd said.

"This is a compassionate piece of legislation," she said.

Todd also has a bill that would reduce the penalties for people caught with small amounts of marijuana.

"If you're caught with an ounce or less, it's not a criminal offense — it's like a speeding ticket," she said.

A second offense would be a misdemeanor, and a third would be a felony.

Todd said she doesn't want to weaken the penalties for drug dealers, but personal possession convictions are unnecessarily clogging up the court systems.

Drug testing lawmakers

Speaking of marijuana. ...

Republican lawmakers this year have sponsored legislation that would require drug testing for some welfare recipients and some Alabamians on unemployment.

They also seem OK with drug testing themselves.

Senate Bill 222 said lawmakers "shall be subjected to periodic drug screenings upon such intervals as the legislative body determines appropriate."

Lawmakers would have to pay for the screens, and any tests that show drug use will be referred "to the appropriate legislative committee governing the internal affairs of the body to which the legislator was elected."

The bill was scheduled for a committee vote last week, but that was delayed when bad weather prevented lawmakers from getting to Montgomery.

The bill calls for a constitutional amendment, meaning that even if passed by lawmakers, Alabama voters would still have to approve the measure.

It is sponsored by Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Daphne. Pittman also has a bill that would require recipients of a form of public assistance to be drug tested if they have prior drug convictions.

About a dozen Republican senators co-sponsored the bill, including Arthur Orr, of Decatur and Paul Bussman, who represents much of Lawrence County.

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Alabama construction jobs end 2013 on high note

Birmingham Business Journal

February 3, 2014

Construction jobs in Alabama finished 2013 with a small increase, thanks in part to a strong finish to the year.

According to statistics released this week by the Associated General Contractors of America, Alabama added 500 jobs in 2013 – a 0.6 percent increase.

For the month of December, however, Alabama witnessed a 2.6 percent increase in the number of construction jobs added, jumping from 76,400 in November to 78,400 in December.

Alabama has been among the states struggling with construction job growth since the end of the recession, so you can bet the industry will be hoping to build on that strong end to 2013.

Mississippi ranked first in percentage of jobs added with a 17.7 percent increase over 2012 numbers, adding 8,500 more jobs.

Georgia ranked fifth, according to the statistics, with an 7.1 percent year-to-year increase in construction jobs.

Tennessee ranked at No. 43 on the list, with 1,500 fewer jobs this December, compared to the previous year.

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Ending a conflict of interest in Alabama's tax appeals process (Opinion from Cameron Smith)

Al.com

February 2, 2014

For several legislative sessions, the Alabama Legislature has considered bills to create an independent tax tribunal in the state, but the idea has repeatedly stalled. More than half of the states in America currently utilize independent tax tribunals and eight states considered creating them in 2013.

The reason for independent tax tribunals is simple: Taxpayers should have a truly neutral, cost-effective means to appeal tax assessments. For now, the Administrative Law Division housed within the Alabama Department of Revenue first hears tax appeals in Alabama. In spite of a

record of apparent fairness by the current Administrative Law Judge, any judge employed by a party so closely tied to a tax dispute faces the perception of a conflict of interest.

The "Taxpayer Bill of Rights," currently before the Alabama Legislature, creates the Alabama Tax Appeals Commission (ATAC), which will transfer the current functions of the Administrative Law Division within the Department of Revenue to an independent agency. Not only would the ATAC hear appeals of Revenue-administered taxes, but the authorizing legislation will allow taxpayers to appeal assessments of sales, use, rental, and lodging taxes from self-administered cities and counties unless the city or county affirmatively opts out of the ATAC appeals system.

Alabamians should not be forced to appeal their tax assessments to the same entities that levied the tax in the first place. Whether business or individual, meaningful access to a neutral arbiter in a tax dispute is crucial to the integrity of the state's tax system. While Alabamians must pay the taxes they owe, they must also have a system that protects them against being forced to pay what they do not.

Alabama's political leaders must ensure that the benefit of ending the conflict of interest is not offset by creating yet another agency in search of ever-increasing funding. The legislation that currently proposes the ATAC also opens the door for additional judges to be added to the commission. While increases in spending could be offset by fees for expedited revenue rulings proposed by the bill, legislators considering the measure would be wise to ensure that the ATAC closely mirrors the Administrative Law Division's current budget until those revenues are proven to be reliable.

As Alabama continues efforts to attract job creators, the state should not be forced to compete against a self-imposed perception that neighboring states offer a fairer, more efficient tax appeals process. With Mississippi and Georgia both enjoying independent tax appeal bodies, Alabama must not wait to remove any doubts of impartiality in the state's tax review system. Not only will Alabama join a growing number of states to do so, but Alabamians will also have more confidence that their tax appeals are as fair as possible.

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Beason won't seek re-election in Ala Legislature

The Associated Press

January 31, 2014

Beason issued a statement Friday saying it's time to end his time at the Statehouse.

He was first elected to the Alabama Legislature in 1998.

Beason was behind Alabama's sweeping immigration bill, considered the toughest in the nation before it was largely gutted by the courts.

The lawmaker also the sponsor of Alabama gun legislation last year. The bill pitted the National Rifle Association against business groups over the issue of guns in workplace parking lots.

Beason has been mentioned as a possible candidate for the 6th District congressional seat being vacated by U.S. Rep. Spencer Bachus.

Beason lost a primary bid to Bachus in 2012, but he hasn't said whether he will run this year.

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Kathy Peterson to run for Alabama Public Service Commission

The Associated Press

February 2, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — Retired businesswoman Kathy Peterson is making another race for the Alabama Public Service Commission.

Peterson announced Saturday that she will run against incumbent Jeremy Oden in the Republican primary June 3.

Peterson ran for PSC president in 2012 and finished third in the Republican primary with 24 percent of the vote.

Peterson says she would use a position on the state's utility regulatory board to speak out against the Environmental Protection Agency and to try to lower energy bills.

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Folsom says paperwork no indication he's running

The Associated Press

February 3, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Former Lt. Gov. Jim Folsom Jr. says he's not planning to run for lieutenant governor even though he filed paperwork creating a campaign committee for this year's race.

Folsom said Monday the filing on Friday was required by Alabama's new campaign finance law because he has a small balance left from his 2010 campaign.

Folsom says some people have encouraged him to seek the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor this year, but he has no plans. Friday is the qualifying deadline for Democratic and Republican candidates. Former state Rep. James Fields of Cullman is seeking the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor.

Folsom served three terms as lieutenant governor. He was defeated by Republican Kay Ivey in 2010.

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Shakeup in Mobile County delegation assured, but newcomers might not be fresh faces

Al.com

February 2, 2014

Brendan Kirby

MOBILE, Alabama – Legislative elections this year are guaranteed to turn over nearly a third of the Mobile County delegation in the Alabama House of Representatives, but that does not mean the newcomers will all be fresh faces.

Or even newcomers, in the strictest sense of the term.

Ahead of this week's deadline to qualify for the party primaries scheduled for June, the frontrunner – and so far only announced candidate – in House District 101 previously held the same seat for eight years.

Republican Chris Pringle seeks a return to the Mobile-based seat he gave up in 2002 in an unsuccessful bid for Congress. He would replace the woman who succeeded him, Republican Jamie Ison, who has announced that she will not seek re-election after three terms in office.

Pringle said he would bring experience to a delegation that will lose Ison, Rep. Chad Fincher and Rep. Jim Barton, who resigned last summer to take a Montgomery lobbying job.

“There are so many good things going on in Mobile right now,” said Pringle, who cited the coming Airbus assembly plant at Brookley Aeroplex. “We’re losing 38 years of legislative experience.”

Pringle is a licensed Realtor who specializes in timber sales and acquisition. He also is a home-builder and contractor specializing in remodeling and the construction of hunting camps. During his time in the Legislature, he rose quickly through the ranks, becoming the minority leader in the House before the end of his first term.

Barton's vacant District 104 seat will be filled this week with a special election pitting Republican Margie Wilcox against Democrat Stephen Carr. Wilcox, who owns and taxi company and pair of other transportation businesses, has said she intends to run for a full four-year term.

Susan Hightower, who narrowly lost in the GOP runoff in December, could not be reached for comment about whether she is considering a rematch.

Fincher, who lost a special election primary contest for Congress in September, said he would not run for re-election to his seat in state House District 102 after the Mobile Area Association of Realtors hired him as its executive director.

No one has formally announced a bid to replace Fincher, but one of his 2006 GOP primary opponents – Citronelle lawyer John Williams – said he is considering a race.

Williams serves as the municipal judge in Citronelle and the Satsuma city prosecutor. In private practice, he helped defend former Mobile County Commissioner Stephen Nodine against a murder charge in Baldwin County in 2010. The jury in that case deadlocked on murder and aggravated stalking charges but convicted him of a misdemeanor ethics violation.

Williams said he would need to decide if he has the time and energy to commit to a campaign and legislative career. In addition to his legal duties, he noted, he has an ownership interest in The Bull restaurant in downtown Mobile.

“I’m giving it some thought. I have not decided to do that yet,” he said. “Back in ’06, I campaigned as hard as I possibly could. And if I’m going to do it, I want to do it right.”

Every legislative seat is up for election this year along with the governor’s office and most statewide elective positions.

Some seats already have drawn announced candidacies, including Senate District 22, which covers part of Baldwin and seven other counties. Republicans Danny Joyner, Harry D’Olive Jr. and Stephen Sexton have announced that they plan to run for the office, currently held by Democrat Marc Keahey.

Friday is the deadline to qualify to run in the Democratic or Republican primary, set for June 3. The general election in Nov. 4.

The deadline is months earlier than it has been historically. The change is the result of a settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice to ensure overseas members of the military have a full opportunity to participate in elections.

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The spy masters at the NSA will soon be taking their orders from an Auburn grad

Yellowhammer News

January 31, 2014

Cliff Sims

President Obama is set to appoint Vice Admiral Michael Rogers to replace Gen. Keith Alexander as the head of the National Security Agency (NSA), the Pentagon announced Thursday. Rogers is currently the head of U.S. Cyber Command.

Rogers, who is a graduate of Auburn University’s Raymond J. Harbert College of Business, will take over the post in the midst of a trying period for the NSA. The fallout from Edward Snowden’s surveillance disclosures will likely continue as more information about the NSA’s domestic spying tactics is expected to drip out in the coming months.

But Defense Secretary Chuck Hagal believes Rogers is up to the task, hailing his “extraordinary and unique qualifications” in a statement released by the Pentagon Thursday.

“I am... confident that Admiral Rogers has the wisdom to help balance the demands of security, privacy, and liberty in our digital age,” Hagel said.

Intelligence community observers believe two of Rogers’ main challenges will be boosting morale in the embattled agency, and convincing the American people and members of Congress that the agency can be trusted.

Interestingly, Auburn University is one of four colleges that was selected last September for the NSA’s National Centers of Academic Excellence in Cyber Operations Program.

“Auburn has devoted significant resources and interdisciplinary rigor across campus to expand new cyber initiatives and extensive collaboration with external organizations,” said Retired Lt. Gen. Ronald Burgess, Jr., Auburn’s Senior Counsel for National Security Programs, Cyber Programs, and Military Affairs. “We are extremely pleased that NSA has recognized our efforts by selecting Auburn University for the program. It is important to the nation, and we want to be a part of the strategic way ahead and feel we can contribute to this national need.”

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Ala. not adding more snow equipment to arsenal

The Associated Press

February 2, 2014

BIRMINGHAM — The state of Alabama probably won’t go shopping for snowplows despite last week’s winter storm.

The Alabama Department of Transportation already has trucks, snowplows and equipment to spread sand and salt water, and spokesman Tony Harris said purchasing many more doesn’t make much sense.

The equipment isn’t used very often, he said Friday, and the cost of additional machinery outweighs the benefit.

“We’ll look at it, but the last ones we bought rusted after 1993,” said Harris, referring to the state’s last major snowstorm.

Before last week, the state’s last major traffic problem linked to snow and ice happened a year ago in north Alabama. Hundreds of motorists were stuck for hours on Interstate 65 in Cullman County after a storm predicted for days dumped 4 inches of snow.

This time, the forecast was the problem. The storm dumped about 2 inches of snow and ice on central Alabama, including metro Birmingham, despite forecasts that only a trace of snow would fall.

Based on forecasts the storm would strike closer to Montgomery than Birmingham, Transportation Department workers took snow plows and spreading equipment south before last week's storm, Harris said. The equipment had to be returned north once the scope of the problem was evident.

Some counties have their own snow removal equipment, and Harris said the state took a "real hard look" at its resources and purchased more bumper-mounted snow plows after the 2013 traffic snarl in north Alabama.

Aside from those plows, which can be attached to large pickupss used year-round, Harris said the state has as many as 10 plow blades that fit on dump trucks for larger jobs.

"We have hundreds of dump trucks that are capable of operating, and sand spreaders. We've probably got 10 to 20 spreaders just here in Montgomery," he said.

Transportation officials will assess the state's response to the storm as early as this week.