



Speaker's Press Clips
Thursday, February 6, 2014

- *Al.com*: [Federal appeals court today rules against AEA, allows Alabama to end payroll deductions for dues](#)
- *AP*: [Tracking the 2014 session: AP's summary of action in the Alabama Legislature](#)
- *Montgomery Advertiser*: [Bill would allow electronic participation in public meetings](#)
- *WSFA*: [Spay-neuter bill in Alabama could cut down animal overpopulation \(VIDEO\)](#)
- *Times Daily*: [Bill to make midwifery legal dies in committee](#)
- *AP*: [Retired Alabama state employees could be in line for one-time bonus](#)
- *Montgomery Advertiser*: [Constitution Revision Commission proposals reach committee, and draw criticism](#)
- *Times Daily*: [Littlest lobbyist: Florence 7th-grader at Statehouse speaks out in favor of service dog bill](#)
- *AP*: [Alabama Senate committee approves bill to allow possession of marijuana-derived oil for medical purposes](#)
- *Anniston Star*: [Wind farm bill advances in Alabama Senate](#)
- *Al.com*: [Sen. Bryan Taylor scales back welfare/work bill; Senate committee approves it](#)
- *Auburn Villager*: [Legislative candidates to qualify by Feb. 7](#)
- *AP*: [Alabama House minority leader seeks re-election](#)
- *Al.com*: [State Sen. Billy Beasley to announce election plans Thursday morning](#)
- *Al.com*: [Huntsville School Board President qualifies for state senator against Paul Sanford](#)
- *Al.com*: [Democratic state Sen. Tammy Irons announces she won't seek re-election](#)
- *Gadsden Times*: [Means qualifies for Senate](#)
- *Al.com*: [Obamacare bad for business? That's no surprise to Rep. Mike Rogers](#)
- *Al.com*: [University of Alabama celebrates Black History Month with art, lectures, music](#)

FULL TEXT

Federal appeals court today rules against AEA, allows Alabama to end payroll deductions for dues

Al.com

February 5, 2014

Challen Stephens

A federal appeals court today ruled in favor of Alabama lawmakers, throwing out a three-year-old injunction that had protected the primary source of funding for the Alabama Education Association.

Today's ruling by the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta means state law now blocks the state teachers association and other organizations from receiving dues through payroll deduction.

Passed by the Alabama Legislature two months after the GOP swept to power in 2010, the law said no government employee may arrange for the automatic deduction of dues "to a membership organization which uses any portion of the dues for political activity."

AEA challenged the law in federal court in Huntsville in 2011, arguing the state ban violated the free speech and equal protection provisions of the First and Fourteenth amendments of the U.S. Constitution, and that AEA was discriminated against based on its political beliefs.

U.S. District Judge Lynwood Smith in March of 2011 issued an 87-page opinion, finding the wording of the ban related to organizations engaged in "political activity" to be both vague and overly broad. His ruling blocked the law from taking effect. The state appealed.

AEA's initial complaint stated that AEA had most often supported Democratic candidates, and argued that former Gov. Bob Riley and other Republicans "rushed through" a new law in December "for the purpose of harming and retaliating" against the organization.

The Alabama State Employees Association and the International Association of Fire Fighters, through affiliates in Decatur and Cullman, later joined teachers in contesting the law.

The 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta in April of 2011 let stand the federal injunction pending appeal by Alabama. The court in late 2011 referred aspects of the case to the Alabama Supreme Court.

The 11th Circuit Court of Appeals today disagreed with Smith and found that the ban on paycheck dues payments for state employees was not overly broad and should not have been blocked from going into effect.

"The Act does not prohibit "private forms of payment, i.e., forms of payment not facilitated by the government," the court found. "This compels the conclusions that the Act only declines to promote speech, rather than abridging it, and that the Act does not implicate any constitutionally protected conduct, much less a substantial amount."

The injunction also said the law's ban on deductions for group's engaged in "political activities" was overly vague, but the 11th Circuit again disagreed, citing activities of AEA and its political arm, A-Vote.

"Some of AEA and A-VOTE's conduct indisputably falls within the Act's definition of political activity, and therefore the challengers cannot bring a facial challenge arguing the term is vague based on other applications," the court said.

"It is not substantially likely the challengers will succeed on the merits (on the vagueness argument) and the district court erred in granting a preliminary injunction on that basis."

Staff writer Brian Lawson contributed to this report.

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Tracking the 2014 session: AP's summary of action in the Alabama Legislature

The Associated Press

February 5, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — A summary of action in the Alabama Legislature on Wednesday, a committee meeting day:

COMMITTEES:

--Senate Children, Youth Affairs and Human Resources Committee approved a bill to say that Alabama would not seek waivers from work requirements for able-bodied adults with no dependents in the food stamp program. Goes to Senate.

—Senate Finance and Taxation-General Fund Committee approved a bill to give a one-time pension bonus to retired state employees. Goes to Senate.

—Senate Finance and Taxation-General Fund Committee approved a House-passed bill to provide an income tax credit to Alabama families that adopt children in Alabama. Goes to Senate.

—Senate Finance and Taxation-Education Committee approved a bill to exempt income tax payments on health savings account contributions like the federal government does. Goes to Senate.

—House Ways and Means-General Fund Committee approved the governor's recommendation to provide a cost-of-living raise to state employees of up to 4 percent, with the raise conditioned on the state taking in more revenue than expected. Goes to House.

—The House Boards, Agencies and Commission Committee approved a bill aimed at letting spay/neuter clinics operated by nonprofit groups remain open. Goes to House.

—The Senate Judiciary Committee approved a bill to effectively legalize cannabidiol, an oil derived from marijuana plants, for medicinal purposes. Goes to Senate.

— The Senate Judiciary delayed a vote on a bill to decriminalize midwifery. Goes to Senate.

AGENDA:

—House meets at 9 a.m. Thursday and Senate at 10 a.m. Lawmakers will meet in joint session at 11 a.m. to honor members of the military.

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Bill would allow electronic participation in public meetings

Montgomery Advertiser

February 5, 2014

Kala Kachmar

The House Ethics and Campaign Finance Committee approved a bill that would allow members of government boards and commission to participate in public meetings via electronic communication.

Meetings would still be required to have a physical location and would require a physical quorum in order to conduct the meeting. Those participating in the meeting electronically would not be able to participate in executive session.

“You can’t just have an Internet meeting,” said Rep. Terri Collins, R-Decatur. “(The meeting) has to comply with the open meetings law.”

Collins said Alabama is one of the few states that forbid the practice of electronic participation.

The bill would only allow members of the body to participate, not members of the public who may wish to speak during a public hearing or a public comment portion of the meeting.

Members who participated electronically wouldn’t be eligible for travel cost reimbursement, which would save money, Collins said.

Mary Pons, an attorney with the Association of County Commissions, said that the original intent of the bill was for governmental bodies that have statewide jurisdiction that may have members traveling from different counties.

Pons said the amendment the committee passed would make that clear and prevent city councils, county commissions and other local governmental entities from being able to remotely participate in a meeting.

Rep. Mary Moore, D-Birmingham, voted against the bill in the committee meeting. She said there’s no way to know who is really on the line.

“We can dress it up any kind of way we want, but it leads to additional corruption,” Moore said, adding that there are no checks and balances with this bill.

“It’s a flawed concept,” she said. “You open up a can of worms when you put this law in place. . . . Someone will figure out how to get around it.”

The committee also passed a bill that will allow the state Ethics Commission to redact personal information, such as home addresses and children’s names, from past statement of economic interest forms for state employees and public officials that are available to the public online.

Rep. David Standridge, R-Hayden, said a bill was passed last year that prohibited that personal information on public records from being available to the public, but had nothing to address past information.

“It would keep it from being online, but it would still be in the record,” he said. “For some people, it can cause retribution. This would remove certain things from that report that could be a danger.”

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Spay-neuter bill in Alabama could cut down animal overpopulation (VIDEO)

WSFA

February 4, 2014

Annie Hubbell

LEE COUNTY, AL (WTVM) -

Lee County Humane Society Director, Bobbi Yeo, hopes that the Alabama Legislature will pass a bill that would enable the shelter to utilize their newly constructed spay and neuter clinic.

"We could open a spay and neuter clinic that we completed construction on last year and open it to the public to provide low-cost spay and neuter services and what happened in other places such as the clinic in Birmingham, the number of animals taken in by the Shelby Humane Society went down 20 percent in the first year and that what we are looking for in Lee County," explains Yeo.

HB 141, sponsored by Representative Patricia Todd, would allow non-profit organizations, like the Lee County Humane Society, to hire licensed veterinarians and open low-cost spay and neuter clinics to help decrease animal overpopulation numbers in the state.

"I figure we are taking in about 190,000 strays a year in Alabama and 110,000 are being euthanized," says Yeo.

This bill has come to the legislature for the past last three years.

In 2012 it was amended heavily, and last year the bill passed in the house and went to the senate where it was never voted on.

Groups opposing the bill believe if these clinics open, they will be unfair competition to their private businesses.

"This is their livelihood and their concern is that they will lose business if low-cost clinics open," says Yeo, "We're just going to be providing spay and neuter so the service will be limited and we will be directing people to go to a local veterinarian for follow ups and general services."

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Bill to make midwifery legal dies in committee

Times Daily

February 5, 2014

Mary Sell

MONTGOMERY — A Senate bill to decriminalize midwifery in Alabama died in committee Wednesday, despite pleas and protests from dozens of supporters at a public hearing.

Alabama is among nine states that can prosecute midwives who assist in home births, although lawmakers questioned how often that actually happens. For several years, women and lawmakers from north Alabama have tried to regulate the practice. Rep. Mike Ball, R-Madison, and Sen. Paul Bussman, R-Cullman, produced a bill this year that simply states the practice isn't illegal.

It briefly looked like the bill might make it out of committee, even though some lawmakers said they had concerns they still wanted addressed. But when Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville, moved not to approve it, a majority of lawmakers agreed with him.

Before the committee vote, Chloe Raum, a certified midwife from Huntsville, told lawmakers that women who choose to have their babies at home rather than in hospitals are making an educated decision and the state should give them that option to do so with a trained midwife.

"Mothers are going to keep having babies and if you don't do something, they are going to be unassisted," she said.

Others spoke against the bill, including Dr. Sherrie Squyres, an emergency medicine specialist from Huntsville. She talked about home births becoming emergency situations.

"It is hard to predict when something will go devastatingly wrong and will do irreparable damage to the baby and put both the baby's and the baby's mother's life in danger," Squyres said.

She said she'd like to see a collaborative agreement between midwives and hospitals.

But Bussman said he's tried for years to set up a working relationship between hospitals and midwives, but hospitals want no part of it.

"They just refuse to deal with it," he said.

Gov. Robert Bentley last month said he's not opposed to legalizing midwifery, as long as there are a few rules in place.

"I feel that midwives that at least have the proper training, that have backup so that if there are any problems they could get the mother — in 1 or 2 percent of births — to the hospital quickly, (then) I have no problems with that," Bentley said.

The House version of the midwifery bill has yet to be voted on in committee.

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Retired Alabama state employees could be in line for one-time bonus

The Associated Press

February 5, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — Retired state employees might get their first pension bonus since 2008.

The Senate Finance and Taxation-General Fund Committee approved a bill Wednesday to provide a one-time bonus, but the bill's sponsor, Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, says the amount and affordability of the bonus still must be determined.

Marsh's bill would provide \$2 for each month of a retiree's state service. A retiree who worked 25 years would get \$600.

Democratic Sen. Roger Bedford of Russellville got the committee to amend Marsh's bill to \$4 per month. He says the Legislature needs to do more for retirees. Marsh says \$2 per month is about as much as the state can afford, and the issue will be addressed when the bill comes before the Senate.

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Constitution Revision Commission proposals reach committee, and draw criticism

Montgomery Advertiser

February 5, 2014

Brian Lyman

The Constitution Commission Commission's mandate was fairly limited: Look at just 11 of the state Constitution's 16 articles, and don't touch the governing document's severe limits on taxation.

The only major issue they could look at was home rule for counties, and the commission's proposals on that matter, after months of debate, were largely limited to a proposal to increase the threshold by which lawmakers could send local constitutional amendments to statewide votes.

Nonetheless, that idea drew anger from a handful of critics Wednesday at a joint meeting of House and Senate's constitutional committees, which held a public meeting on the proposed change.

"We continue to move more and more away from constitutional government," said Ken Freeman, a critic of the change. "This is definitely a move toward home rule."

The Constitution of 1901, framed to disenfranchise blacks and poor whites, centralizes most political power in Montgomery and requires many issues of local governance to be approved via the constitutional amendment process. Currently, a single negative vote from one of the state's 140 representatives and senators is enough to send a local constitutional amendment to a statewide vote. As a result, Montgomery residents may find themselves voting on proposals that have no bearing on the River Region. In 2012, local voters were asked to vote on the fate of a water system outside of Mobile.

The move was also frequently used for matters related to alcohol and gambling. Under the proposal, sponsored by Sen. Linda Coleman, D-Birmingham, a local amendment could go to a statewide vote with three or more negative votes from senators, or nine or more no votes from representatives. Coleman has sponsored similar bills in the past, predating the Constitutional Revision Commission, which began work in 2011.

The move had the support of the Association of County Commissions of Alabama. Sonny Brasfield, the executive director of ACCA, said the intent was "to allow local votes on purely local constitutional amendments." However, Joe Godfrey, executive director of the Alabama Citizens Action Program (ALCAP), which opposes gambling, said that local votes on matters like bingo set precedents for the whole state.

"I think there's a reason why the Constitution applies to all counties and localities equally," he said.

There were also objections raised to the whole idea of revising the Constitution. Bill Anthony of Tallassee said he saw no need to revise the state's governing document, comparing to an attempt to revise the Bible.

"There ain't nothing wrong with the Bible, and there ain't nothing wrong with the 1901 Constitution," he said.

The commission did not vote on the proposal Wednesday. Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville, the chairman of the Senate Constitution and Elections committee, indicated that he would seek an amendment to Coleman's proposal, possibly excluding gambling matters. Taylor is an outspoken opponent of gaming operations in the state.

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Littlest lobbyist: Florence 7th-grader at Statehouse speaks out in favor of service dog bill
Times Daily

February 5, 2014
Mary Sell

MONTGOMERY — A Florence seventh-grader was back at the Alabama Statehouse for the second time within a month Wednesday.

This time, Ahbee Orton was speaking to lawmakers about legislation she said will help protect her and her guide dog, Lanie.

Currently, nothing in Alabama law allows for the prosecution of people who intentionally distract or harm service dogs.

Rep. Johnny Mack Morrow's House Bill 204 will make it a misdemeanor to interfere with the work of a service dog. Intentionally injuring or killing a service dog, or allowing another dog to hurt or kill a service dog, would be a Class C felony.

Morrow, D-Red Bay, sponsored the legislation after meeting Ahbee and her family last year at Camp Courage, an event for children with visual and hearing disabilities.

"It will help protect me and other people and their service dogs from distractions and attacks," said Ahbee, while 2-year-old Lanie, a black lab and Bernese mountain dog mix, rested at her feet. Ahbee, who is blind, relies on her dog to help her cross roads and walk around her neighborhood. Distractions can be dangerous, she said.

Ahbee and her father, Paul Orton, said there have been a few instances where Ahbee and Lanie have been approached by either stray dogs or dogs with owners. Part of the reason behind the legislation is to educate people about working dogs.

Ahbee received Lanie last year, after a monthlong training process in which the two were paired. The entire process to obtain the dog costs about \$60,000.

That's part of the reason Morrow said his bill is needed. If a dog is hurt and can no longer work, replacing it can be expensive. The legislation puts those costs on the responsible party.

The bill received a favorable report from the House Judiciary Committee and now goes to the entire House.

Several other states have measures to protect service dogs.

Last year, lawmakers here made it a crime to injure or interfere with a police dog, a search and rescue dog, or their handlers.

Ahbee was at the Statehouse in January when lawmakers honored the 10 participants of Camp Courage.

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Alabama Senate committee approves bill to allow possession of marijuana-derived oil for medical purposes

The Associated Press

February 5, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — Alabama lawmakers took a step toward effectively legalizing a marijuana extract that doesn't get people high, but can be used to treat certain medical conditions.

The Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday approved a bill aimed at allowing people with certain illnesses to possess the oil called cannabidiol, also known as CBD oil.

Sen. Paul Sanford, R-Huntsville, says the oil does not make people feel high, because it is low in marijuana's psychoactive compound.

Parents of children with seizure disorders are supporting the legislation. Anecdotal evidence suggests CBD oil can be used to treat the debilitating condition.

The bill would give parents and patients a justifiable defense if charged with drug possession because of the oil.

Sanford says his legislation is separate from efforts to legalize marijuana for medicinal or recreational use.

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Wind farm bill advances in Alabama Senate

Anniston Star

February 6, 2014

Tim Lockette

MONTGOMERY — Ginny Shaver brought pictures, so the people in Montgomery could see Cherokee County the way she sees it.

A grainy shot of a bald eagle that landed by a lake on her property. The view from the top of Shinbone Ridge — that wall of mountain that looms at your left shoulder when you drive from Gadsden to Leesburg.

"This is where they're going to put the windmills," Shaver said of the ridge. "It's beautiful. People have their weddings up there."

Shaver was one of more than 100 people who packed a committee room in the Alabama Statehouse Wednesday for a state Senate committee hearing on a bill to regulate wind farms.

Sen. Phil Williams, R-Gadsden, proposed the bill after a Texas-based company, Pioneer Green, announced plans to build a series of electricity-producing wind turbines — all on private property — along Shinbone Ridge in Etowah and Cherokee counties as early as this year.

Advocates for the project said it would generate jobs and tax revenue for Cherokee County, without the smokestacks and pollutants normally associated with power plants, but the proposal has divided local landowners.

"These wind towers are not the farm windmill you see in 'The Wizard of Oz,'" Williams said. The proposed Shinbone windmills would stand 250 to 350 feet tall with blades anywhere from 120 to 160 feet wide — big enough, Williams said, for a Boeing 747 to fit within the sweep of the blades.

Under Williams' bill, wind farm projects would need approval by the state's Public Service Commission and the local government. Turbine-building companies would have to create a plan to have the windmills dismantled if the project went belly-up. Furthermore, windmills would have to be set 2,500 feet back from the property line and would be allowed to generate no more than 40 decibels of noise at the property line.

The bill has earned Williams strong support from windmill opponents, who say the Shinbone Ridge project would ruin the beauty of the area, which is dependent on tourism at Weiss Lake. Still, the bill wouldn't ban the turbines outright.

Williams said there were already regulations in place for anyone who planned to build houses, hospitals or non-wind power plants.

"There's zero in place for wind," he said.

Etowah County resident Steve Shaneyfelt said Pioneer Green is considering his property as a possible windmill site. Shaneyfelt said he doesn't have a problem with regulating windmills.

"I am opposed to this regulation if it's a moratorium on wind farms," he said. Shaneyfelt said the 2,500-foot limit was stricter than the buffer zones required for mines or pig farms.

"It means I'd have to own a square mile of property," he said. "Is there anyone in this room who owns 640 acres?"

Shaneyfelt also took exception to the bill's noise restriction. He said no one has put noise restrictions on a gun range that is about a mile from his property.

"Every day we listen to the rat-tat-tat of machine guns and rifles," he said. "I'm not opposed to that. It's not my property."

Matt McDonald, a lobbyist for the energy company NextEra, displayed a decibel meter at the podium while addressing the senators. He, too, said the 40-decibel limit lower than the sound he'd recorded in the committee room before the meeting.

"When no one is speaking, decibel level is 57," he said in a calm voice. "With me hollering and screaming as I am now, it's 72."

McDonald said NextEra generates electricity through multiple sources, but largely uses windmills. He was the only person at the meeting who made significant mention of wind power as a low-pollution source of fuel. He said projects like Shinbone Ridge could create jobs and tax revenue for rural counties.

Shaver, the Cherokee County resident, said those jobs would be mostly construction jobs, and would largely vanish when construction ends.

"Unless you own a concrete construction company, there aren't going to be a lot of jobs for the locals," she said.

The Senate committee voted 5-1 in favor of Williams' bill, which sends it on to the Senate for further consideration. Sen. Del Marsh, R-Anniston, voted for the bill, but he said before the vote that there may be "room for change" when the bill hits the full Senate.

The sole "no" vote came from Sen. Bobby Singleton, D-Greensboro.

"The industry needs some regulation," he said. "But in terms of the setbacks, I'm not so sure. We have to look at people's property rights."

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Sen. Bryan Taylor scales back welfare/work bill; Senate committee approves it

Al.com

February 5, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- A Republican state senator scaled back his bill to require able-bodied public benefits recipients to perform community service, and a Senate committee approved it this morning.

The bill, SB 87 by Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville, now simply says that Alabama will not seek any more waivers from the federally-imposed work requirements in the food stamp program.

Taylor said the work requirements have been in place since Congress passed welfare reform in 1996.

But Taylor said Alabama and other states have received waivers from the requirements since Congress passed the stimulus bill in 2009 in response to the recession. Taylor's two-page bill now says that Alabama will not seek any more waivers after Oct. 1.

Taylor said the requirements apply to able-bodied, working age adults without dependents. They are required to work or participate in a job program 20 hours a week.

“The intent all along was to focus on those individuals who are able-bodied and should be working and are not,” Taylor said.

The food stamp program is now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Spending on SNAP, which is federally funded, has more than doubled since 2008, and a majority of recipients are now working age.

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State Sen. Billy Beasley to announce election plans Thursday morning

Al.com

February 5, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- State Sen. Billy Beasley of Clayton, who said in December he is considering running for the Democratic nomination for governor, has scheduled a news conference Thursday at 9:30 a.m. to announce his 2014 election plans.

Beasley, 73, is a pharmacist who was elected to the Senate in 2010 after serving three terms in the House of Representatives.

If Beasley enters the governor's race, he would be the second announced candidate for the Democratic nomination. Kevin Bass, a businessman and former minor league baseball player from Fayette, announced his candidacy in December.

Friday is the deadline for Democrats and Republicans to qualify for the June 3 primaries.

Beasley's announcement will be at the Alabama State House in Montgomery.

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Legislative candidates to qualify by Feb. 7

Auburn Villager

February 4, 2014

Allison Blankenship

With the qualifying deadline being Friday, key local legislators face no opposition thus far. Neither House Speaker Mike Hubbard (R-Auburn) or state Sen. Tom Whatley (R-Auburn) had opposition earlier this week for June's Republican primary; no Democrat had filed papers against either candidate.

Hubbard has represented the House District 79 since 1998, which includes portions of Auburn and Opelika.

“Our motto for our legislature this year is ‘common sense conservative’ and that’s exactly what you can expect this session,” said Hubbard in a video blog outlining his goals for the year. “We want to create jobs. We want to make sure Alabama continues to move forward.”

Whatley stated similar goals he wants to continue to focus on in the upcoming years.

“My goal was to create jobs and improve the economy and we’ve created over 2,500 jobs since I went to office and that’s my plan for the next four years; it’s to continue to create jobs and cut taxes,” Whatley said. “Creating jobs and concentrating on economic development will take care of people working and making money and all the good things will fall in place.”

The qualifying deadline for the state elections was moved up after the U.S. Department of Justice sued the state to allow the military and any other overseas Alabamians time to get their absentee ballots submitted. The federal deadline for absentee ballots is 45 days before the date of the election, and the agreement reached as a result of the suit allowed for the qualifying deadline to be moved up accordingly.

The primary election will be on June 3 and the primary runoff on July 15, with the general election on Nov. 4. Despite the change in deadline for Democrats and Republicans, Independent candidates and third parties may still qualify for the general election ballot through June 3, Secretary of State Jim Bennett announced in January.

Tim Sprayberry, chairman of the Cleburne County Republican Party, has announced he will be running for Senate District 13, which is currently held by Gerald Dial (R-Lineville). Senate District 13 includes parts of Cleburne, Clay, Chambers, Cherokee, Lee and Randolph counties.

Sprayberry became involved with the Republican Party when he was in college and unsuccessfully ran for the State House of Representatives in 2010. Sprayberry has been stated saying he believes Dial is a Democrat, as Dial has previously served six terms in the state Senate as a Democrat and two terms in the state House.

Dial recently told The Anniston Star that he has unfinished business and plans to serve one more term. He has a plan to move state schools to online textbooks and wants to see sales tax on groceries abolished.

Ronnie Reed (D-Phenix City) qualified for Senate District 83, a seat held by George Bandy (D-Opelika), who has been a representative since 1994 and is chairman of the Alabama Democratic Conference and president of the Lee County Alliance. In 2010, Reed ran unsuccessfully against Bandy for the House District 83 seat.

With incumbent State Rep. DuWayne Bridges’s announcement that he would retire from Alabama House District 38, which he has held since 2000, businessman Randy Price (R-Opelika) has announced his candidacy to take Bridges’s place.

Price will be running against Isaac Whorton (R-Valley), an attorney with deep roots in Chambers and Lee counties.

State House Rep. Pebblin Warren (D-Shorter for District 83) for District 82 and state Senator Billy Beasley (D-Clayton) had no opposition earlier this week. Warren is chair of the All-Alabama Academic Team Program and acts as consultant for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Beasley has held office since 2010. He served three terms in the state House before being elected to the Senate. He is president of Pratts Station, LLC, and operates Clayton Drug Company and the Clio Drug Company.

This is the first election that legislators are running under newly drawn district lines. Some local districts were modified under the new reapportionment plan.

Senate District 23, currently held by Whatley, now takes in South Auburn and the Beauregard community.

“I got more of Auburn and lost a little bit of Alexander City and Tallapoosa County. I picked up the Beauregard community as well, but the district was overpopulated so we had to lose some people and make sure the district lines were maintained,” Whatley said.

Much of Auburn south of I-65 was previously in the district represented by Beasley.

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Alabama House minority leader seeks re-election

The Associated Press

February 6, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — The minority leader in the Alabama House, Democrat Craig Ford of Gadsden, has decided to run for re-election rather than seek higher office.

Ford said Wednesday he can do more for education, state employees, law enforcement and others by seeking his District 28 seat again from Etowah County.

Ford has considered running for governor or lieutenant governor. Both offices are held by Republicans who are seeking re-election. Friday is the deadline for Democratic and Republican candidates to sign up for this year's elections.

Ford has served in the House since 2000, when he was elected to replace his late father, Rep. Joe Ford. He became House minority leader in 2010.

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Huntsville School Board President qualifies for state senator against Paul Sanford

Al.com

February 5, 2014

Nicole Emmett

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama -- Huntsville School Board President David Blair has qualified for the State Senate in the Republican Primary to be held June 3. Blair will challenge current incumbent, Paul Sanford, he announced today.

"I am running for the State Senate because we need a strong leader that will work for us. Our city and county officials have built a solid and vibrant area," Blair said. "Unfortunately, we have had little help from our current senator. I will be a senator who will work with area leaders to bring new jobs, build and maintain our roads, keep our schools strong and be a good steward of the taxpayers' money. As I travel across the district talking to citizens and elected officials, the one thing I keep hearing is that we need better representation in Montgomery. As State Senator, I will make Montgomery work for us."

Blair served on the Huntsville City School Board from October 2000-2004. He was re-elected to the board in October 2010 and is currently serving as the President of the Board. Blair has an Electrical Engineering Degree, Master of Physics Degree and Doctorial work in Astrophysics. David Blair is employed by Miltec Systems as a Managing Director.

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Democratic state Sen. Tammy Irons announces she won't seek re-election

Al.com

February 5, 2014

Paul Gattis

FLORENCE, Alabama - State Sen. Tammy Irons, whose District 1 will include parts of west Huntsville after new districts were approved last year, announced today she will not seek re-election.

"It is with a heavy heart, but after much thought and prayer, I have decided not to seek reelection to the Alabama state Senate," Irons said in a statement today. "I have been honored and humbled by the people of The Shoals who have shown great faith and confidence in me, having elected me twice to the Alabama House of Representatives, and then to the Alabama Senate."

Irons said her expanded district played a factor in her decision not to seek re-election.

"The new Senate District 1, which takes effect in November 2014, stretches all the way from West Lauderdale County to Memorial Parkway in Huntsville and is geographically more like a Congressional District," Irons said.

"I am concerned that covering such a large territory would take even more time away from my law practice at a time when I have many commitments this year. I am also looking forward to spending more quality time with my family."

Irons said she plans to devote more time to her law practice and her family. Her decision to leave the Legislature, however, does not signal an end to her political career, she said.

"I am not closing the door on politics," she said. "I plan to continue to go across north Alabama and the state to discuss political issues at the state and local level that affect Alabamians. While I will focus on my law practice for now, I will likewise continue to focus on ways to make North Alabama and our great state a better place to live."

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Means qualifies for Senate

Gadsden Times

February 5, 2014

Andy Powell

Attalla Mayor Larry Means, who served three terms in the Alabama Senate before his re-election defeat in 2010, wants to go back to Montgomery.

Means, 66, qualified Wednesday as a Democrat for Senate District 10, which includes all of Etowah and a portion of Cherokee, DeKalb and St. Clair counties.

Qualifying for both parties ends Friday.

Means was defeated in his re-election bid by current Sen. Phil Williams, R-Rainbow City, after being indicted on gambling corruption charges.

Following a mistrial in 2011, Means was acquitted of the charges in 2012. He was elected Attalla's mayor later that year, regaining a position he held from 1992 to 1998.

Williams has qualified as a Republican for the District 10 Senate seat.

"I am running for election to Senate District 10 because I think it's time to put the needs of the people and children of the district first and not the commands of any political party or party boss," Means said in a release.

Means served on the Attalla City Council from 1976 to 1980 and 1984 to 1988. He first was elected to the Alabama Senate in 1998.

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Obamacare bad for business? That's no surprise to Rep. Mike Rogers

Al.com

February 5, 2014

Leada Gore

Alabama Congressman Mike Rogers said reports the Affordable Care Act could push millions of employees out of the workforce in the coming years "comes as no surprise."

"We've known Obamacare is a flawed law that will hurt folks across east Alabama. It has already had a negative impact across the Third (Congressional) District with rising premiums for less health care coverage," he said.

Rogers, R-Saks, a longtime critic of the president's signature initiative, said the data comes at a time when the economy is still struggling to recover from years of sluggish performance.

"During these uncertain economic times, knowing more jobs will be lost in the future because of this law is discouraging. It is time for Obamacare to be repealed before it damages our country anymore," Rogers said.

"Congress and the president should come together on common sense solutions to expand health coverage while strengthening our economy."

The Congressional Budget Office released a new report Tuesday showing the president's healthcare law could cost as many as two million full-time jobs by 2024. That figure is more than double the CBO's earlier predictions of 800,000 fewer full-time jobs by 2021.

Republicans quickly capitalized on the news but Democrats brushed off the claims, saying the healthcare initiatives will help many more Americans.

You can share your stories about the Affordable Care Act here.

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University of Alabama celebrates Black History Month with art, lectures, music

Al.com

February 6, 2014

Melissa Brown

TUSCALOOSA, Alabama -- The University of Alabama has nearly 30 events planned in the coming weeks to commemorate Black History Month on its Tuscaloosa campus.

The calendar is coordinated by UA's Crossroads Community Center, an intercultural initiative through the Division of Community Affairs.

Events run through the beginning of March and range from specialized tours of campus, film screenings and lectures.

Below are some highlights of the calendar, which can be viewed in full here. (Locations of the events are listed in bold print.)

5:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 6 – “Unchaining Alabama” exhibit opening at the Williams Americana Collection, Gorgas Library, sponsored by Benjamin Flax and the Summersell Center for the Study of the South. Exhibit will remain on display throughout February.

6:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 6 – “Covering and Breaking Barriers” presentation and question and answer session with journalists Frank Sikora and Nathan Turner Jr., 216 Reese Phifer Hall.

5 p.m. Friday, Feb. 7 — Paul R. Jones Gallery reception for “Scottsboro Boys: The Fred Hiroshige Photographs” exhibition, featuring “The ‘Scottsboro Case’: What We Remember and What We Forget” lecture by Dan T. Carter and special guest Shelia Washington, director of the Scottsboro Boys Museum and Cultural Center, Paul R. Jones Gallery, 2308 Sixth St., Tuscaloosa.

1 p.m. Monday, Feb. 10 — The A.L. Tour: Honoring the Legacy of Autherine Lucy, Reese Phifer front steps, sponsored by College of Communication and Information Sciences.

10 a.m. Wednesday, Feb. 12 — African-American Heritage campus tour, Reese Phifer front steps, sponsored by College of Communication and Information Sciences.

6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 18 – Discussion, “Black Masculinities: Nelson Mandela to Kanye West,” 205 Gorgas, sponsored by Women’s Resource Center and the department of gender and race studies.

5 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 22 — Second Tuscaloosa African Film Festival and arts and crafts sale, Bama Theatre.

6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 26 — “Stormy Weather: The Influence of Campus Climate on Building Inclusive Communities” lecture featuring Dr. Sue Rankin, 222 Lloyd Hall.