



Alabama lawmakers winding down session with no fix for budget

Alabama State House building in Montgomery March 6, 2013 (Bob Gathany / bgathany@al.com)

The Alabama State House building is shown in Montgomery, Ala., in an image from 2013. (AL.com) (Bob Gathany (bgathany@al.com))

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Alabama lawmakers could pass a reduced state budget on Thursday but expect to return to Montgomery this summer before the spending cuts hit home.

Gov. Robert Bentley has vowed to veto the budget and call legislators back for a special session.

"We're looking at passing a bare bones budget, but quite frankly, in the minds of a lot of people we'll need something more and that's the reason we're coming back in August," Senate budget chairman Arthur Orr of Decatur said today.

It will be the governor's decision on when to call a special session.

Bentley spokeswoman Jennifer Ardis said today there is not yet a time frame.

The Legislature has not passed any of Bentley's proposals to **raise taxes by \$541 million** to plug next year's hole and to help cover obligations after next year.

Orr said the budget the Senate will see Thursday will be essentially the same as what the **House of Representatives passed two weeks ago**.

It would spend \$1.6 billion from the General Fund, a reduction of \$200 million, 11 percent, from this year.

State agency heads say they will close prison facilities, lay off employees, eliminate some services for children and the poor and cut other programs to reduce spending.

For large agencies, like the Alabama Medicaid Agency, the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Human Resources, the reduction in state funding would mean a loss of even more federal dollars.

"It's an embarrassment to the constituents that we serve," Sen. Bobby Singleton, D-Greensboro, said.

Singleton said he had not decided whether he would vote for the budget.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said he expected the Senate to pass the budget.

It would have to return to the House to get final passage and go to the governor.

"It's not a good budget," said Rep. Elaine Beech, D-Chatom. "But nobody seems to want to come up with revenues."

Beech sponsored two tax bills that died. One was part of a package backed by the House Republican Caucus that would have raised the maximum business privilege tax while exempting some businesses from the minimum tax.

House Republicans put the brakes on their tax bills after hearing they would be DOA in the Senate.

Beech said she was hopeful the special session would be more productive.

"Nobody wants to increase taxes," she said. "But you can't support the services if we don't have the revenue."

Singleton said he was optimistic about the special session. He said he expected a gambling bill to be part of the solution. He supported Marsh's proposed constitutional amendment to allow a lottery and casinos at the state's greyhound tracks.

The bill had stiff opposition in the Senate and never came up for a vote.

Thursday will be the 29th day of the legislative session, which can go up to 30 meeting days.

There was speculation Wednesday that legislators would end the session Thursday and skip the final day.

Some bills to raise revenue are still in play, although most would not be expected to have a major impact on the 2016 budget year, which starts Oct. 1.

One would allow state agencies to raise fees based on increases in the consumer price index, with limitations, including a 2 percent cap on the increases.

It passed the House today and could get final passage in the Senate Thursday.

Bentley visited the Senate today to urge support for a bill that would allow a **bond issue of up to \$50 million** to build a hotel and conference center at Gulf State Park and make other improvements in the park.

The bond money would be added to \$85 million in oil spill recovery money from BP for the project, which advocates say would keep more beach convention business in Alabama and generate money to help support the other state parks.

Three Republican senators voted against the bill in committee on Tuesday.

They questioned whether it was wise to borrow money for a park project during a budget crunch.

Supporters say new revenues from the park will pay off the debt.

Marsh said he supported the bill and hoped it would pass.

