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Proponents of Sept. 18 vote key on paychecks

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MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Proponents of using \$437 million from a state trust fund to prevent deep budget cuts are encouraging a big voter turnout by people whose paychecks or loved ones will be affected by the outcome Sept. 18.

Opponents are trying to make sure everyone else doesn't overlook the odd election date. With little more than the Internet and social media at their disposal, they are accusing legislators of using scare tactics to avoid their constitutionally mandated duty to make state services match state revenue.

"I believe we have to force their hand by voting no and getting them back into special session," said Becky Gerritson, president of the Wetumpka Tea Party.

The special election has only one issue on the ballot: Whether to approve a constitutional amendment that will take \$145.8 million a year for three years from the Alabama Trust Fund. The fund was set up 30 years ago to preserve the state's royalties from natural gas wells drilled in state-owned waters along the Alabama coast.

The Legislature set the date less than two weeks before the state's new fiscal year begins Oct. 1 so that the governor would have time to call a special session in case voters say no.

Proponents, like Gov. Robert Bentley, are aiming their pitch toward those who could be affected the most.

Speaking to a group in Montgomery that included state employees, he said he won't approve new taxes if the constitutional amendment fails, and he could be forced to cut

spending by non-education agencies, such as prisons, Medicaid and state troopers, by 17 percent.

"Those of you who work for state government, your job may depend on it," he told the audience.

Bentley said he's counting on groups that will be affected, such as the Alabama State Employees Association, hospitals and nursing homes, to take the lead in turning out yes votes by talking to their members.

Groups have responded by featuring the vote on publications that go to their members, by distributing literature, and by making contributions.

A group formed to promote the vote, Keep Alabama Working, has raised about \$600,000. More than half of that has come from the Alabama Nursing Home Association, whose members count on Medicaid patients to fill two-thirds of their beds.

Keep Alabama Working spokesman Rick Journey said much of the budget is going for printing material for organizations to distribute and he's not aware of any plans for a big advertising campaign.

The organization's printed material is full of dire warnings. It says that many rural hospitals and nursing homes will close, 9,500 state prisoners will be released, and 16,000 people will lose their state mental health services if voters reject the constitutional amendment.

At Manufacture Alabama, which represents many of Alabama's biggest industries, President George Clark is distributing material for his members to display in employee break rooms. He said proponents don't have the money for a big ad campaign like the state saw for Gov. Don Siegelman's lottery campaign in 1999 and Gov. Bob Riley's \$1.2 billion tax plan in 2003.

Voters rejected both proposals in special elections like the one coming up.

Clark, a former state representative from west Alabama, sponsored legislation in 1981 that created what is now the \$2.3 billion Alabama Trust Fund. He said the money was set aside for use in tough economic times like these. If the constitutional amendment fails, he said states competing with Alabama for new industries will make sure those industries know about Alabama cutting state services.

"It's an embarrassment if we can't take care of the basic services of state government," he said.

An opponent of the constitutional amendment, former Republican gubernatorial candidate Tim James of Greenville, said many voters not involved with state government on a regular basis don't realize the special election is coming up. "The only political talk

out here is one thing and one thing only — kicking you know who out of Washington," James said.

Alabama's top election official, Secretary of State Beth Chapman, said most single-issue elections have drawn less 10 percent of the voters. The lottery and the tax plan drew gubernatorial election-size turnouts of 50 percent or more, but they were backed by millions in advertising. She said a turnout of 20 to 21 percent is probably optimistic unless proponents mount a last-minute advertising campaign.

Based on past elections, she said, "The lower the turnout, the more likely it is to pass." She said that's because only the most knowledgeable and passionate voters turn out.

Opponents ranging from GOP organizations to tea party groups are working to increase the turnout. They don't have a central organization or big budget, but they are using their websites, email lists and social media to make sure people know about Sept. 18.

At the Federation of Republican Women, President Elois Zeanah said voters elected Republicans to run state government in 2010 to get the state on sound financial footing, but taking money out of the trust fund puts that off.

"This kicks the can down the road past the next election to the next Legislature," she said on her website.

Conservative political organizations proved in 2010 that they know how to run a grassroots campaign when it comes to the Alabama Trust Fund. Some of them worked to defeat a plan to take \$1 billion out of the trust fund for road and bridge projects. Voters rejected it by a nearly 3-2 margin.

This time around they are telling voters not to believe the warnings of hospital closures and prisoner releases.

"They would never get re-elected if they allowed the mass release of prisoners," Gerritson said.