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## State may consider increasing its General Fund

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In 1967, when Lurleen Wallace became governor, one of her first missions was a trip to Bryce Mental Hospital in her native Tuscaloosa. The conditions she saw at Alabama's primary mental health facility were beyond deplorable. It was a heart wrenching and Damascus road experience for the demure and soft-spoken lady. However, she roared like a lion with determination to remedy this blight on the state. She implored her husband's legislature to appropriate significant increases in the Mental Health Budget and she passed bond issues to relieve overcrowding.

Our current governor, Robert Bentley, also a Tuscaloosan, may have had a similar conversion experience a few months ago. Our state prisons are in a crisis situation. The ghastly horror stories throughout the year surrounding our largest women's prison facility have reverberated around the nation, the federal courts taking over our prisons. The population is well beyond what the courts can handle. The revelation at Julia Tutwiler Prison further exacerbated the crisis.

Our kindly country doctor governor toured Tutwiler in early March and quietly said, "I have to have to build some new prisons in my second term." This is probably a foreshadowing in a second Bentley administration. You may see the governor move from the right to the center to moderate somewhat on the need for some new revenue for the beleaguered General Fund to build prisons and as well as to simply perform the basic functions of state government.

The General Fund has had no new revenue enhancement measures in 30 years. There are many measures that would be easy to tap. Our cigarette tax is the lowest in the Southeast. As an example, it is overwhelmingly if the legislature would allow people to vote on it, and there must be some tax on the Indian casinos that are hauling in millions of untaxed profits from low-income areas.

Several other issues that have remained unresolved in this quadrennium will be the subject of this year's campaigns and will be at the forefront for the new legislature beginning next year. The legislature may again look at rewriting Alabama's lengthy and cumbersome state constitution. Our Alabama Constitution was written in 1901 and is the longest of any state, with many amendments.

Every election year, candidates espouse one prevalent theme — "jobs, jobs, jobs." We need more jobs in Alabama. However, we are buying them with tax abatements. This is depleting our resources and going towards education in the state. We may need to do more to help our small businesses with more tax breaks. We also need to invest heavily in technical job training in the state. Education issues will be at the center of the spectrum of discussion next quadrennium. What about education for students? Has this term's legislature hurt education by lowering teachers' salaries for four years? Have programs like the Alabama Accountability Act hurt public education? Will charter schools be the next initiative mounted by conservatives?

The most talked about issue this year was the Common Core issue. It was tabled and swept under the rug during this year's legislative session. However, you can bet your bottom dollar that it will be front and center when the new legislature convenes in 2015. It has been a hot topic of debate during this year's legislative contests.

Legislators will be asked again to decide whether to support the national Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion. Bentley and the current legislative leadership are adamantly opposed to accepting this expansion. They say we cannot afford what we have now, much less more cost. It is doubtful that the governor or a Republican legislature will change their position on this issue. We will see.

See you next week.

Steve Flowers is Alabama's leading political columnist. His column appears weekly in more than 70 Alabama newspapers. Steve served 16 years in the state legislature. He may be reached at [www.steveflowers.us](http://www.steveflowers.us).

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