



OUR VIEW: Legislature has much on its plate during new session

Published: Sunday, February 05, 2012, 5:48 AM Updated: Sunday, February 05, 2012, 4:13 PM

N By **Birmingham News editorial board**

We support most of the agenda House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, outlines in an essay on the front of this section today.

Job creation must be a top priority. Though the improvement in Alabama's unemployment rate outpaced the rest of the nation from July to December, the state's overall rate of 8.1 percent still puts Alabama in the bottom half of all states.

Helping businesses save money by getting rid of complicated, unnecessary regulation should allow them to hire more workers. But lawmakers must be careful they do not cost the state budgets too much revenue in their zeal to give businesses a break.

As noted in an editorial last week, spending for the General Fund, a major source of money for Medicaid, prisons, courts, public safety and health and other state functions, could fall 25 percent, or by more than \$400 million from this fiscal year to the next.

Many lawmakers and Gov. Robert Bentley are handcuffed because they signed no-tax pledges, but a \$400 million hit to a \$1.8 billion budget is going to hurt. Residents will see deep cuts in services, and many of the programs supported by the General Fund -- prisons, mental health and child welfare, for example -- could be subject to federal review if they fail to provide adequate services. Raising the per-pack tax on cigarettes, as some lawmakers have proposed, could help ease some of the cuts.

Lawmakers also are likely to tweak the state ethics law that determines how much a person can spend on a public official or employee. What lawmakers can't do is exempt any class of worker -- teachers, for example -- from the ethics law. The controversy over how much a student can spend on her teacher has an easy fix. We agree with Jim Sumner, director of the state Ethics Commission, that \$20 to \$25 is the proper amount for a gift to any worker or public official.

In education, Alabama is only one of a few states that outlaws public charter schools. The Legislature should authorize charter schools and allow successful local school systems more autonomy in how they operate.

The Republican leadership also has vowed to repeal the 61 percent pay increase from 2007 and allow voters to determine how lawmakers are compensated. There are sure to be some Republicans and Democrats who will fight repealing the pay raise, though.

We'd also like to see the Legislature ban texting while driving; pass a seat-belt law that covers all passengers in a vehicle, not just those in the front seat; and approve a strong smoke-free law that prohibits smoking in public places. And, we'd like to see lawmakers send to voters the first two rewritten articles of the state constitution, make a real attempt at tax fairness, halt executions until the state's system of capital punishment undergoes a thorough review, and solve Jefferson County's general fund mess.

And, with tornadoes once again fresh on everyone's minds, the Legislature shouldn't wait to act on the recommendations from the governor's Tornado Recovery Action Council, such as a strong statewide building code.

It is time for the Legislature to get busy. There is lots to do.

© 2012 al.com. All rights reserved.