



Gov. Robert Bentley vows that Alabama will live within its means

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By **David White -- The Birmingham News**



Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley delivers his State of the State address to a combined session of the Alabama Legislature at the historic Capitol in Montgomery, Ala., Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2012. (AP Photo/Dave Martin)

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- Gov. Robert Bentley in his **State of the State speech** Tuesday vowed to chop the size of government, oppose tax increases and make sure the state lives within its means in budgets he soon will propose for next year.

"The process of cutting, reducing and saving taxpayers money will never stop as long as I'm governor," Bentley said in his speech to lawmakers, Cabinet members and others, delivered on the first day of this year's regular session of the Legislature.

"I will oppose any effort to raise taxes on Alabama families, and I will veto any tax increase," Bentley said.

Bentley vowed to propose legislation to consolidate some state agencies, but gave no details. "We must reduce the size and scope of government and we have already begun this process," he said.

Bentley in his speech also said he would push for laws to:

--Give economic recruiters "new tools to grow jobs in Alabama." Bentley gave few details but has said he favors a law that would give income-tax incentives to industries that locate in Alabama.

--Create a "limited number" of **charter schools**, independent public schools freed from some regulations that regular schools must follow.

--Allow "more decision-making at the local level" for existing public schools to "develop their own innovative strategies, free from state or federal bureaucracy."

--Give teachers a tax credit for every dollar they spend in their classroom.

Bentley also promised that his administration would "make sure any rule or regulation that stands in the way of economic development is eliminated."

The governor also talked about the **state borrowing money by selling GARVEE bonds**, which use federal highway aid to repay the debt. He said the money would repair highways and bridges statewide "as soon as possible," but specified no amount.

Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, after Bentley's speech said, "I thought he painted a broad brush stroke for where we're headed in this state."



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Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley delivers his State of the State address to a combined session of the Alabama Legislature at the historic Capitol in Montgomery, Ala., Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2012. (AP Photo/Dave Martin)

"There weren't very many details at all," Ward added.

Rep. Joe Hubbard, D-Montgomery, agreed. "Long on ideas. Short on actual proposals," he said.

But Rep. Paul DeMarco, R-Homewood, praised Bentley's speech. "I think he hit on the issues that everybody wanted to hear about," such as "education reform" and government efficiency.

Revenues from the General Fund, which is part of the state operating budget for non-education programs, are estimated by the Legislative Fiscal Office to fall about \$367 million, 22 percent, from this year to the 2013 fiscal year, which starts Oct. 1.

Bentley pledged that his proposed state operating budget for fiscal 2013 would "not cut one penny" from the corrections department, which now is budgeted to get \$377.9 million from the General Fund this year. "Not one single prisoner will be set free due to a lack of funds," he said.

Bentley also promised to protect the public safety department, which oversees state Troopers, and to protect people who depend on the Department of Human Resources, which among other things oversees foster care and child abuse investigations.

Bentley did not offer any guarantees for Medicaid, courts, the mental health department and many other agencies that get General Fund money.

Spending in fiscal 2013 from the Education Trust Fund is expected to fall about \$152 million, 2.7 percent, because of a new law that will cap trust fund spending.

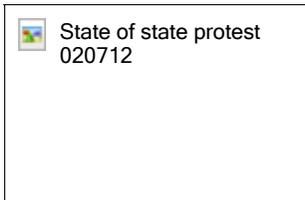
Bentley promised that his education budget for next year would protect programs designed to show teachers how to better teach reading, math and science, and other "proven programs" that boost student achievement. He also said he would propose investing "more of our education dollars in the health of our children."

Several lawmakers wondered aloud if Bentley intended to propose spending ETF dollars on Medicaid, which now gets much of its state money from the General Fund.

"If that is what he proposes, he would have a very difficult time getting that through the Legislature," said Rep. Jay Love, R-Montgomery.

Bentley in his speech did not mention the state's immigration law.

The law's sponsor, Rep. Micky Hammon, R-Decatur, said the omission pleased him. "That shows it's not going to be a major issue this year. We know we have to simplify and clarify a few things, but there will be no major changes," he said.



State of state protest
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About a dozen protestors gather outside the Capitol to demonstrate against Alabama's immigration law before Gov. Robert Bentley's State of the State address. (AP Photo/Dave Martin)

Before and after Bentley's speech, about 20 people from Montgomery, Birmingham and elsewhere stood outside the east Capitol entrance, holding candles and red and white signs that spelled out, "LOVE THY NEIGHBOR." A few signs said "Repeal HB 56," last year's bill number of the immigration law.

One of the people, Ben Alford of Wetumpka, a retired Episcopal priest, said they showed up to "bring a message of love and justice, and repealing HB 56."

News staff writer **Kim Chandler** contributed to this report.

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