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Bentley wants state employees' support for referendum

Gov. Robert Bentley encouraged state employees Tuesday to support a Sept. 18 referendum that would help boost the state's General Fund budget, saying "your job may depend on it."

Bentley, a Republican in his second year, also told state employees that the state would make up for these tough times when the money becomes available — although those funds may become available to education employees sooner than others.

He said he would support a pay raise for education employees when the funding becomes available in the education budget, and that with the revenue upturn in the education budget that could soon be a real possibility.

"When this thing turns around, we will not forget our state employees," Bentley said Tuesday to the Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce.

He encouraged area business leaders to support the referendum, which if passed would allow the state to borrow \$467 million from the Alabama Trust Fund in coming years. The funds would allow the state to avoid large cuts in the state's General Fund budget, which provides funding for Medicaid, public safety and

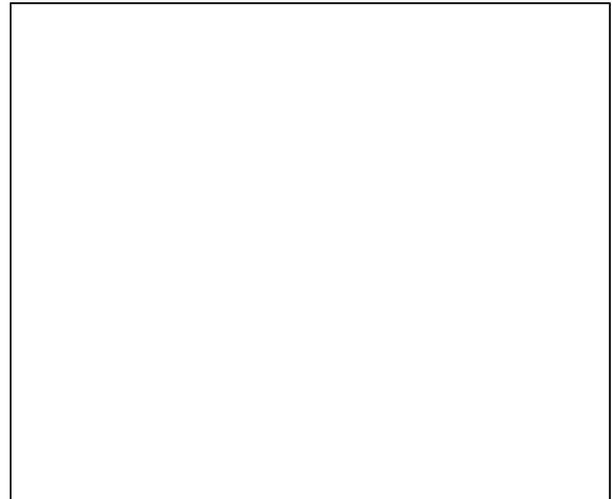
prisons.

"Give us a chance to get through this difficult time," Bentley said of the special election and said they have known 2013 would be the toughest budget year. He said, when he came into office in January 2011, that the state had exhausted its rainy day funds and the federal surplus money that once helped buoy the state's budgets were gone.

"We don't want to lay off state employees. We don't want people to lose their jobs," the governor said.

Bentley also said that he and legislative leaders promise that the money borrowed will be paid back. He said after addressing the chamber members that he wishes that the bill that lawmakers passed in the last legislative session had included language requiring the money to be paid back, but he said that budget issues were being worked out in the last hours of the session. Sen. Bryan Taylor, R-Prattville, has prefiled legislation for the next session that would

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require the funds be paid back.

He believes people will support the referendum because state officials have streamlined government, saving \$674 million annually so far with expectations to save more, because people trust him and believe he is honest, and because state officials have vowed to pay back the money.

Opponents of the referendum have said the state should live within its means and not borrow from the savings account to balance the budget.

Bentley said the referendum would be a bridge to get the state through 2013 and 2014. The 2013 fiscal year begins Oct. 1, soon after the referendum.

He said he is asking those who will be most affected by the referendum to support it.

"I am strongly for it and I am out in the state talking about it," Bentley said.

The governor said he trusts voters will pass the amendment and is uncertain what would happen if voters do not. He said it could lead to across-the-board cuts, which would be troubling for hospitals, for the Alabama Department of Corrections, and for other areas. Bentley said he does not have the authority to release prisoners, but the corrections department could face a 17 percent cut.

While Bentley does not want to see employees lose their jobs, he said that

"down the road" they may explore offering "incentives for people to retire who are eligible to retire."

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