

Special session certain after budget inaction

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The months-long stalemate between Gov. Robert Bentley and the Alabama Legislature over deficits in the General Fund ended Thursday with no resolution and the certainty of a \$24,000-per-day special session.

The regular session ended Thursday with the same discord that dogged the previous days. The Legislature's austere budget cut \$200 million from state agencies, and Bentley made good on his promise to veto. The House overrode Bentley's veto, but the Senate had already adjourned, effectively killing the budget.

Senate Finance and Taxation General Fund Committee Chairman Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, said the session had been "extremely frustrating."

"It took time for an agreement that there really is a significant problem and that just passing a cut budget is not the best answer to the problem," Orr said.

The lack of a resolution means state agencies are without a spending plan for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1. But Bentley said that is better than the budget lawmakers passed.

The vetoed \$1.6 billion budget would have cut funding to Medicaid, the Department of Human Resources, prisons and the Department of Mental Health by about 5 percent. Other state agencies would see deeper reductions.

"I really will not bring the Legislature back until they have their minds right," Bentley said when the session ended.

Rep. Lynn Greer, R-Rogersville, said he didn't know when the Legislature might reconvene for the special session, but he speculated it could be mid-August. He said he was disappointed by the way the regular session ended and called on Bentley to get with individual lawmakers to work out a solution.

"It was the worst session I've ever been through," said Greer, who has served several stints in the Legislature dating back to 1974.

He believes the state's agencies can continue to operate as normal if legislators can secure revenue to cover the \$200 million shortfall, as opposed to the \$541 million Bentley is seeking to fix long-term problems. Where those funds will come from, however, is still anybody's guess.

"I think the House and Senate need to do some (constituent) polling and see what people will support," Greer said. "You've got a large number of people who won't vote for any tax."

Greer believes legislators could enact a 25-cent tax increase on a pack of cigarettes, though he recently had a lengthy conversation with a four-pack-per-day smoker who didn't want to see the price of her

cigarettes raised. He said raising taxes on new car purchases is also a possibility, and a gambling or lottery bill could once again see action in a special session.

“I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if (the lottery bill) came up again,” he said.

What did and didn’t happen

Here's a look at what passed and failed this session:

What passed

Prison reform

Legislators, in an attempt to overhaul the state's crowded prison system, approved sweeping changes to sentencing and probation standards. The bill, signed into law by Bentley, is aimed at easing crowding in state prisons that hold twice the number of inmates they were originally designed to hold.

Charter schools

Lawmakers approved GOP-championed legislation to allow charter schools in Alabama for the first time. The bill, already signed into law, will allow for 10 new “startup” charter schools each year and unlimited conversions of existing schools.

Open meetings

The approved bill tightened a loophole in Alabama's Open Meetings Act that allowed councils, commissions and other public bodies to get around a requirement to conduct business in public by holding a series of small meetings with less than a quorum of members.

Alabama Accountability Act

Alabama lawmakers made changes to the school choice program that helps families pay for private school. It expands the yearly cap on the tax credits that fuel the scholarships from \$25 million to \$30 million. It would also tighten income requirements and increase reporting requirements.

Two-year college board

Alabama lawmakers created a new appointed board to oversee the state's two-year college system, stripping the authority from the state Board of Education. GOP legislators who pushed the change said the schools should be more focused on workforce development. School board members derided it as a power-grab.

Medicaid long-term care

Alabama lawmakers passed a bill to establish integrated care networks to allow more Medicaid recipients to stay in their homes instead of nursing homes. Proponents said it could cut Medicaid costs by \$1.5 billion between 2018 and 2028.

Right to try

Alabama became the latest state to approve legislation to allow terminally ill patients to use experimental drugs, biological devices and products that have passed first-phase testing by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

State agency fees

The legislation allows state agencies to request fee increases every five years to reflect changes in the Consumer Price Index.

What failed

Bentley's tax package

Lawmakers handed Bentley a defeat as they rejected his call for \$541 million in taxes including increased taxes on cigarettes, auto sales and auto rentals. However, round two could be coming in an expected special session on the budget this summer.

Payday loans

The bill would have reduced what borrowers pay when they turn to the short-term lenders. The bill sought to give borrowers more time to repay a loan, taking the window from 14 days to six months, giving them a better chance at paying it off without taking out a subsequent loan.

Marriage licenses/gay marriage

The bill, brought in expectation that the U.S. Supreme Court would legalize gay marriage nationwide, would have done away with state-issued marriage licenses. Another bill that failed this session would have given civil immunity to judges and ministers who refuse to marry same-sex couples.

Gambling

A proposal to authorize a lottery and four casinos was pushed by Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, but did not get a floor vote. Marsh said he wants to continue the conversation on gambling during the special session.

Medical marijuana

The bill sought to allow people with certain medical conditions to use small amounts of marijuana. Medicinal marijuana advocates cheered when the Senate Judiciary committee passed the bill, but the victory turned out to be short-lived.

Abortion bills

The bill sought to ban abortion clinics within 2,000 feet of public K-12 schools. The bill would force a Huntsville abortion clinic, one of the state's five abortion clinics, to move or close. Another bill would have banned abortions when a fetal heartbeat can be detected, which can happen as soon as six weeks into a pregnancy.

Gulf State Park

The \$50 million bond issue was to help build a lodge and conference center at Gulf State Park. Bentley named the bill a priority, but it sparked opposition from some North Alabama state senators.

Tim Tebow Bill

The bill would have allowed home-school students to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities in their school district. Similar legislation has failed every year for the past decade, but made it farther this year.

Anti-gay discrimination bill

The bill sought to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Protection would have applied in the areas of employment and housing. The legislation also would have protected against discrimination related to voting, financial transactions and accommodations.

Execution drug secrecy

Co-sponsored by Greer, the bill aimed to keep secret the suppliers of lethal injection drugs used in state executions. The proposal failed for the second consecutive session.

Renaming Edmund Pettus Bridge

A Senate resolution sought to rename Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge, a historic site in the voting rights movement that also bears the name of a Confederate general and Ku Klux Klan officer, who was born in Limestone County in 1821. The beating of protesters on the bridge galvanized support for passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

— *The Associated Press contributed to this report.*