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WITH LIST OF LOCAL LAWMAKERS

Money: Legislative session's No. 1 issue

Lawmakers return to work Tuesday

By Mary Sell
Montgomery Bureau



These are the members of the Northwest Alabama legislative delegation. Top row, from left: Reps. Johnny Mack Morrow, Marcel Black, Lynn Greer and Greg Burdine. Bottom, from left: Rep. Ken Johnson, and Sens. Tammy Irons, Paul Bussman and Roger Bedford



MONTGOMERY — Area lawmakers head to Montgomery this week for the start of a legislative session that will be much like others in recent years where money — or a lack of it — will dominate discussions.

Tough decisions about how revenue will be doled out among state agencies will be common, but local delegation members have their own thoughts about what must take place to have a successful session.

The legislative session begins Tuesday.

In the Shoals, the key issues include increasing money for road projects, more accountability measures, raises for teachers, school safety and job creation.

Rep. Lynn Greer, R-Rogersville, chairman of the House transportation, utilities and infrastructure committee, said he'd like to see more money for local road projects, like expanding U.S. 43 to the Alabama-Tennessee state line. But he said he'll call the session successful

if lawmakers can, "balance the budget, not raise taxes and spend money wisely."

"If we can get in and get out without borrowing money — spend what money we've got," he said.

State Sen. Roger Bedford, D-Russellville, mentioned three markers to a successful session.

"I would like to see that we allow the people of Alabama to have a recall provision and more accountability into the process," he said. "I'd like to see us expand Medicaid to cover the working poor and see that our state employees and teachers receive a raise, a substantial raise."

Bedford is bringing back a bill that would allow for a voter-initiated recall process after an official is in office at least one year. Last year, the bill didn't make it out of committee.

The Republican leadership has said recently that unless expected state revenues in 2014 increase dramatically, raises, especially for non-education state workers, are unlikely. Meanwhile, Gov. Robert Bentley has said Medicaid won't be expanded to cover more Alabamians under the federal Affordable Care Act.

Sen. Tammy Irons, D-Florence, said a good session would focus on job creation, funding services for veterans, as well as for programs to boost K-12 student achievement.

She also mentioned the Legislature must find a way to pay back the \$437 million transferred from the state's trust fund to the general fund over the next three years and also come up with more money for mental health.

"As the nation still grapples with the Newtown, Conn., tragedy (where 26 elementary students and staff members were killed, as well as the shooter and his mother, those of us in the Legislature and the governor are faced with evaluating how the state should respond to better protect our children and our schools," Irons said in an email. "So far, legislators and citizens have suggested a variety of approaches to preventing such a tragedy in Alabama. However, there is one solution that we hope all legislators would be on board with: Properly funding mental health."

Rep. Marcel Black, D-Tuscumbia, said a priority is always passing a budget that will "adequately fund state services the people of Alabama need and deserve." He said finding a solution remains to be seen because economic trends are not conclusive and the leadership in Montgomery has said it won't raise revenue under any circumstance.

"We need find sufficient money to give teachers, support personnel and state employees a much-deserved raise," Black said. "If we make it a priority, it can happen. We cannot attract quality teachers and employees without providing them adequate salaries. Not only have they not been given a raise, the Legislature actually cut their pay."

Florence Democrat Greg Burdine said action this session must produce more revenue for the state.

"We've got to come up with additional revenue streams," Burdine said. "We have cut and cut until we've reached the point that we can't cut any more. Costs have gone up faster than we can cut."

Burdine, a lawyer, said he plans to introduce a bill to increase filing fees in probate court to, he hopes, alleviate some of the problems created by recent cuts. Half of the money collected will go to probate court, with the remainder being used for mental health services.

"Those kinds of things would help some, but they do not generate enough money to get us out of trouble," Burdine said. "We need to do something that will make a significant difference. We still have corporate tax loopholes, and we need to address Internet sales.

"That's going to be difficult to change because under the current leadership they have made it clear they will not increase taxes. To make a real difference, they will have to change their position or come up with other ideas. I would gladly listen to other ideas, but I've seen very little in the Republican agenda that deals with this issue."

Rep. Johnny Mack Morrow, D-Red Bay, is sponsoring a bill that would allow teachers to train as reserve sheriff's deputies and carry weapons in school.

He said the session would be a success if Republicans and Democrats simply stop fighting.

"That's what's keeping us from doing so much," he said. "I love partisan politics when I'm running for office, but after November, the R's and the D's need to disappear."

Many Republicans are focused on seeing laws passed that are part of what the party's House leadership refers to as its "We Dare to Defend Our Rights" agenda.

"We need meaningful gun reform laws — anti-gun control laws," said Rep. Ed Henry, R-Hartselle. "We need to address the women's health issues on abortion clinics and we need to get the budgets out quicker so that people can look at them in a timely manner."

House GOP leaders have said placing more restrictions and oversight on abortion clinics and protecting the Second Amendment are among their priorities.

House Majority Leader Micky Hammon, R-Decatur, said his priority is the "Dare Defend" bills.

"We will pass those early in the session and make sure they become law, as well as working with the Senate and governor's office to downsize government," Hammon said about what would make a successful session.

Hammon said downsizing will mean the elimination of state government positions, but he hopes most will happen through attrition, not layoffs.

State Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, chairman of the Senate general fund budget committee, has proposed multiple ways for state government to spend less, including privatizing retail alcohol sales, which he said could save up to \$45 million a year. Other proposals include consolidating state law enforcement agencies and information technology departments.

He said a successful session will result in a "more lean, effective and efficient state government" in the future.

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Northwest Alabama delegation

HOUSE

District 1

Rep. Greg Burdine, D-Florence; first term

- Represents: Lauderdale County
- Statehouse phone: 334-242-7265
- Email: greg@smblawyers.net
- Committees: Insurance; judiciary

District 2

Lynn Greer, R-Rogersville; fourth term

- Represents: Lauderdale County
- Statehouse phone: 334-242-7576
- Email: greerllc@bellsouth.net
- Committees: Rules, general fund, transportation, utilities and infrastructure (chair); ethics and campaign finance

District 3

Marcel Black, D-Tuscumbia; fifth term

- Represents: Colbert County
- Statehouse phone number: 334-242-7686
- Email: marcel.black@alhouse.gov
- Committees: Financial services; education policy

District 18

Johnny Mack Morrow, D-Red Bay; fifth term

- Represents: Franklin County
- Statehouse phone: 334-242-7698
- Committees: State government

District 7

Ken Johnson, R-Moulton; first term

- Represents; Lawrence and Winston counties
- Statehouse phone: 334-242-7754
- Email: kenjohnsonrep@gmail.com
- Committees: General fund; insurance

Senate

District 6

Roger Bedford, D-Russellville; sixth term

- Represents: Colbert, Fayette, Franklin, Lamar, Lawrence, Marion and Winston counties
- Statehouse phone number: 334-242-7862
- Email: Senbedford@aol.com
- Committees: Banking and insurance; confirmations; finance and taxation, education; finance and taxation, general fund; governmental affairs; rules

District 1

Tammy Irons, D-Florence; first term (formerly served in House)

- Represents: Lauderdale and Colbert counties
- Statehouse phone number: 334-242-7888
- Email: tammy@ironslawfirm.com
- Committees: Constitution, campaign finance, ethics and elections; banking and insurance; energy and natural resources; job creation and economic development; rules; small business

District 4

Paul Bussman, R-Cullman; first term

- Represents: Lawrence, Cullman and Winston counties
- Statehouse phone number: 334-242-7855
- Email: p_bussman@bellsouth.net
- Committees: Agriculture, conservation and forestry; banking and insurance; children, youth affairs and human resources (chairman); constitution, campaign finance, ethics and elections; fiscal responsibility and accountability; health