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Governor pushes for tax plan during Bryce dedication

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Gov. Robert Bentley used his comments during a memorial dedication at historic Bryce Hospital on Sunday to encourage Alabamians to contact their legislators in support of his plan for "fair" tax increases as part of a solution to a shortfall in the state's 2016 operating budget.

"I am telling you we have to do this, and I encourage you to tell your senators and representatives," Bentley said.

The governor has called for a General Fund budget plan that would raise \$541 million in new revenue through tax and fee increases to help address a projected \$700 million shortfall in fiscal year 2016. The governor's proposal has gained little traction in the Legislature, where lawmakers have proposed more austere budgets.

Bentley has warned cuts could result in the layoffs for state employees, a reduction of services for the mentally ill, and the closure of state trooper posts, state parks and prisons.

Bentley spoke to an audience of about 100 during the dedication ceremony for a memorial in honor of the thousands of Bryce patients buried on the historic campus.

Bentley framed the issue in terms of the impact on Alabamians and said he wanted opponents in the Legislature to "look into the eyes" of the people it would affect as they vote against the governor's proposal.

Bentley blasted the draft of the budget approved by the House Ways and Means Committee on Thursday.

The budget approved by the committee would reduce funding for Medicaid and the Department of Mental Health by 5 percent compared to the current fiscal year. The cuts would mean about \$5 million less from the General Fund for mental health.

Mental Health Commissioner Jim Reddoch said the cut would mean a total loss of about \$15 million for the department with the additional loss of some federal matching funds. The budget discussions remain too preliminary to predict exactly how cuts would impact the department, Reddoch added.

However, the commissioner said previously any cuts would likely be felt in the community-based programs provided by local agencies that contract with the department to provide the bulk of services in the state.

While the state can close a state park, it can't simply cut treatment for the mentally ill, Bentley argued.

"They need to be treated like anyone else who has any type of illness," Bentley said.



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Alabama Governor Robert Bentley speaks at the Bryce Hospital Cemetery Memorial Dedication Ceremony held at the old chapel on the Bryce Hospital campus in Tuscaloosa, Ala. on Sunday May 17, 2015. staff photo | Erin Nelson

The governor said he would call a special session if needed to solve the budget problem.

“We cannot continue to put Band-Aids on this problem,” He said, adding he wanted to solve the budget issue during his governorship.

Bentley praised the state's mental health services, adding he wanted it to continue to improve.

“I really want it to be something that everyone across the country can look at and say that is special,” Bentley said.

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