

# Prisons, autism therapy key issues still facing legislators



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The state budgets, a plan to build prisons and a closely watched bill to require many insurance plans to cover behavior therapy for autism are key topics facing the Alabama Legislature in the final days of the session.

Lawmakers return to Montgomery on Tuesday for the 25<sup>th</sup> day of a maximum 30 meeting days. The session must end by May 22.

One task that could consume part of the final days is redistricting.

On Tuesday, the House of Representatives is scheduled to consider a plan to draw new boundaries for most of the 105 House districts.

A federal court ruled in January that lawmakers had to redraw nine House districts and three Senate districts before next year's elections because of racial gerrymandering.

The Legislative Black Caucus objected to the map approved in committee last week and vowed to use filibusters and procedural moves to delay a vote.

## Budgets

The education and General Fund budgets for next year have passed both houses.

The next step is probably conference committees to reconcile differences.

**The education budget** would boost spending from the Education Trust Fund by \$90 million over this year, to \$6.4 billion.

That would include money to hire 152 additional teachers in grades 4-6 and boost funding for the state's prekindergarten program from \$64.5 million to \$78 million.

**The General Fund budget** would level-fund most agencies, spending \$1.85 billion from the General Fund, the same as this year. That includes \$3.3 million to add 30 state troopers.

The budget sets aside a \$95 million reserve for possible changes made by Congress and to help support the budget in 2019.

## Prisons

The House Judiciary Committee will **hold a public hearing** on a plan to build three men's prisons and a women's prison to replace Julia Tutwiler Prison.

That's a revised version of a bill that passed the Senate in March, which called for three new prisons and renovations to Tutwiler and others.

Gov. Kay Ivey said she supports building new prisons.

### **Insurance for autism therapy**

The Senate General Fund committee is scheduled on Wednesday to consider a bill that would require many insurance plans **to cover applied behavior analysis** for those diagnosed with autism.

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama, the state's largest insurer, opposes the bill, saying decisions on coverage should be left to employers.

Parents and other advocates have led an intense lobbying campaign for the bill, which passed the House 100-0.

Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Montrose, chairman of the General Fund committee, said he plans for the committee to vote on the bill Wednesday.

That would put it in position for possible final passage next week.

### **Midwives**

A bill to make it **legal for certified professional midwives** to practice in Alabama will be heard by the Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday. It has passed the House.

Like the autism bill, the midwives' bill has drawn supporters to the State House, including for a public hearing last week.

### **Redistricting**

A key sticking point in the redistricting plan is representation in Jefferson County.

Currently, the state's most populous county includes all or part of 18 House districts. Republicans hold 10 of those seats.

The plan the House will consider on Tuesday moves District 43, represented by Republican Arnold Mooney, entirely into Shelby County, leaving Republicans with a 9-8 edge in Jefferson County.

Members of the Black Caucus have said the split should be 8-8 or 8-7 in favor of Democrats.

The same dispute played out in the Senate, where black Democrats delayed a vote on the district plan. But the Senate eventually passed a plan giving Republicans a 4-3 edge in Jefferson County.

Democrats could seek to delay a vote in the House by having the redistricting bill read at length, which would take an estimated 13 hours.

The redistricting plans will be subject to federal court approval.

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