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FEATURED

Legislators talk fuel tax, funding for education, mental health

Tiffany Owens Jan 20, 2018



Legislators, from left, Rep. Corey Harbison, Rep. Randall Shedd and Sen. Paul Bussman are seen at the Chamber's January Community Luncheon Friday.

Tyler Hanes | The Cullman Times



A proposed local gas tax to raise money for roads and addressing the state's failing education and mental health care systems were key topics during the Cullman Area Chamber of Commerce's community luncheon Friday.

The local legislative delegation — Sen. Paul Bussman, Rep. Randall Shedd and Rep. Corey

Harbison — provided attendees an overview of upcoming bills and issues facing the state, covering topics such as revamping the jail food money system, tougher penalties for domestic violence committed in front of minor children and a referendum vote on whether to raise gas taxes to fund road improvements locally.

The event drew a large crowd at the All Steak Restaurant where Bussman didn't mince words in calling out the Alabama State Board of Education in its handling of state superintendents and reading initiatives among other issues, calling the board "incompetent" and proposing redirecting some of its funding to local school districts.

After sitting through the board's budget hearing, Bussman told interim Alabama Education Superintendent Ed Richardson, who replaced Michael Sentance after just one year on the job, that he "had no confidence" in the board.

"They hired Mr. Sentance and then threw him under the bus. They acted like it wasn't their choice. They spent a whole lot of money getting things done over there, and then they said, 'Well, that was the wrong way to go, let's go another direction.'"

Bussman said he plans to reduce the state board's revenue and reallocate it local school systems.

Shedd led off the luncheon, praising Gov. Kay Ivey and fellow gubernatorial candidate and Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle for putting politics aside to successfully recruit the new Toyota-Mazda plant to be built in Limestone County, a project which will create more than 4,000 jobs.

"They had to work together to accomplish that goal, and that's really what politics should be about," Shedd said.

The state's general fund and education budgets are both in better shape than previous years, Shedd said, citing lawmakers' decision to put \$93 million of the BP oil settlement money aside last year for this year.

Shedd also touched on a new committee aimed at identifying problems and finding solutions that affect rural and urban residents, which often drag the state down in various metrics of quality of life.

Father-to-be Harbison said he plans to introduce legislation that would create stiffer penalties for those convicted of felony domestic violence in front of minor children.

"Domestic violence is a problem in Cullman County and all across the state. I got to see a lot of that while working as a law enforcement officer," Harbison said.

He, joined by Shedd and Bussman, said he supported a local referendum to allow residents decide whether they want to raise gas taxes to fund road improvements. Harbison said local legislators have worked with Sheriff Matt Gentry and the Cullman County Commission and are willing to support any agreement the sheriff and county can come to in regards to jail food money.

In closing, Bussman said it was time for Alabama to tackle social problems that have been being brushed aside in recent years, adding that mental health needed to be a priority for lawmakers.

“We have mental health issues across the state that have got to be dealt with. We have kids coming to school that are dangerous. We have kids coming to school that haven’t been fed. We have kids coming to school that haven’t had a parent show any concern for them in months. We have kids coming to school that have parents that are on drugs,” Bussman said.

“We’ve got problems, and we’ve got to attack those problems and we’ve got to deal with those problems. We can’t just keep shoving it under the rug and say the teachers are going to handle it, the hospital is going to handle it, or the police are going to handle it.”

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