

Local legislators say fixing prison system on top of agenda

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Alabama House Speaker Mac McCutcheon slams the gavel as the Alabama legislative session begins, Tuesday, Jan. 9, 2018, in Montgomery, Ala. (AP Photo/Brynn Anderson)
Brynn Anderson

With the economy growing and the budget in relatively good shape, local representatives believe addressing Alabama's prison system will be a priority of the current legislative session.

"We have three lawsuits filed against us regarding the prison systems based on three issues: staffing; overcrowding; and mental health services," said Rep. Steve Clouse (R-Ozark).

"Gov. (Kay) Ivey's staff has been negotiating with the plaintiffs to determine a solution. The solutions will involve a lot more money."

Clouse, who heads the House's Ways and Means committee, said Ivey has asked for \$30 million more in funding for the prison system, with most of the money going to hire more corrections officers and more mental health professionals. If the move is passed, the money will be immediately available, he added.

Clouse said Monday the state's prisons systems are dangerously close to federal intervention again, especially in the mental health sector, a fact Ivey confirmed during her "State of the State" address Tuesday in Montgomery.

For state Sen. Harri Ann Smith (I-Slocomb), prison reform and mental health reform should occur concurrently. She said the fact the state has few remedies regarding mental health issues has caused probate judges to struggle with cases involving those who suffer from some type of disorder.

Sometimes those who need to be in a mental health facility are left in the public square. Some end up in jail after a breakdown or episode of some sort, she said.

“Some of it is just truly mental health issues. In rural areas, it is such a problem,” Smith said. “We have a lot of people who need mental health help. They don’t need to be in jail.”

Rep. Dexter Grimsley (D-Abbeville) said changing the way courts process drug cases could reduce some of the overcrowding issue. For those arraigned on possession charges, he suggested that making assignments to community corrections facilities instead of penitentiaries would benefit the state.

“I think drug offenders could be tried there first instead of wasting the penal system or the inside of prison walls for that,” he said. “I think we could invest in more community-based programs and allow them to correct the habits such as the addiction problems.”

Broadband communications

Expanding broadband internet services, especially to rural areas, could also be discussed in the 2018 session. Rep. Donnie Chesteen (R-Geneva) chairs the House’s Technology and Research committee and plans to sponsor a bill that would expand broadband services to rural areas.

The legislation would follow the Wireless Infrastructure Renovation for Education Act (WIRED Act) that Chesteen, a former educator who also serves on the Education Ways and Means committee, authored and the Legislature passed in 2016.

That act provides funding for schools to switch to broadband services or upgrade current broadband connections if needed. Without a new bill to expand broadband across the state, WIRED cannot have the full effect desired, Chesteen said.

“The problem was students couldn’t do the work (assigned) at home without broadband services,” he said.

Additionally, the expansion of broadband services could improve telemedicine, farming, and economic development, Chesteen said.

“You’re going to have a hard time attracting businesses to locate in an area without high-speed internet,” he said. “We have to work on closing the digital divide in the state.”

Chesteen completed his homework on the subject in the offseason, visiting the headquarters of Microsoft and Apple to discuss the latest in technology. He said he wants to make sure the state invests in technology that will last should it pursue the funding of broadband services.

Ivey also expressed an interest in fueling broadband services during her State of the State address.

“Adequate broadband enhances educational opportunities, increases economic development prospects and develops critical communication systems,” she said. “I strongly support legislation to encourage new broadband investments, and I ask the Legislature to join me in assessing our state’s broadband needs to ensure resources are placed where they are most needed.”

Education

Chesteen expressed pride in adding 146 teachers to the state last year and noted he has a continued desire to lower the number of students in each classroom.

“The numbers I’m looking at are positive,” he said.

Thanks to a better budget and a rolling reserve, the state should be able to fund a pay increase for all teachers, Chesteen said. Ivey called for the increase – and a pay raise for all state employees – on Tuesday.

“Gov. Ivey’s budget is in line with our projected revenues,” Chesteen said.

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