

Senate approves General Fund -- but not state employee raise

SOUTH UNION STREET ([//WWW.MONTGOMERYADVERTISER.COM/BLOG/SOUTHUNIONSTREET](http://WWW.MONTGOMERYADVERTISER.COM/BLOG/SOUTHUNIONSTREET))

Brian Lyman (<http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/staff/12375/brian-lyman/>), Montgomery Advertiser

Published 6:30 p.m. CT Feb. 20, 2018 | Updated 6:42 p.m. CT Feb. 20, 2018

The Alabama Senate on Tuesday passed a General Fund budget. But not a state employee pay raise.



Alabama Senate (Photo: File)

Senators voted 26 to 2 for a \$2 billion General Fund that provides a significant increase for funding for the Alabama Department of Corrections, more modest raises for Medicaid, Mental Health and Human Resources and adds 30 state troopers to the road.

But an accompanying bill that would give state employees a 3 percent cost-of-living increase — the first COLA for the state's 33,000 state workers since 2008 — was delayed, after what Senate Finance and Taxation General Fund chair Trip Pittman, R-Montrose, described as negotiations over the scope of the proposal.

"I understand there is a member or members that want to increase the raise or raise the scope of the raise," he said.

Pittman said he expected the pay raise to come up when the Senate returns Thursday, and did not expect the size of the pay raise to move considerably, if at all.

In the local delegation, Sen. Dick Brewbaker, R-Pike Road, was listed as not voting for the

bill.

The proposed General Fund, if it passes, would be the largest in the state in a decade. It would also have one of the largest single-year increases for the Department of Corrections in recent history: The state's prisons would see an increase of more than \$50 million, to hire staff and implement changes to Corrections' medical and mental health systems.



Sen. Trip Pittman on the senate floor in Montgomery on April 18. Pittman is the sponsor of Senate Bill 12, which would add nitrogen gas to lethal injection and the electric chair as allowable methods of execution in the state. (Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)

U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson last year ruled that mental health care in the state's prisons was ["horribly inadequate \(/story/news/2017/06/27/federal-judge-rules-against-](#)

[adoc-mental-health-suit/431798001/\)](#)” and ordered Corrections and attorneys for inmates who sued over inadequate care to come up with a solution. Combined with an expected \$30 million boost in the current fiscal year, Corrections could see its budget go up 19 percent over its current levels by the end of the 2019 fiscal year.

**Join for as low as
\$9⁹⁹ for a year**

Subscribe Now
**([http://offers.montgomeryadvertiser.com](http://offers.montgomeryadvertiser.com/specialoffer?gps-source=BEAZfeb&utm_medium=agilityzone&utm_source=bounce-exchange&utm_campaign=UWEB2017)
/specialoffer?gps-
source=BEAZfeb&
utm_medium=agilityzone&
utm_source=bounce-
exchange&
utm_campaign=UWEB2017)**

Maria Morris, senior supervising attorney for the Southern Poverty Law Center, which represented the inmates, said in a statement the bill was a “first step” but that the funding increases on their own would not address the issues identified in court.

“Any discussion of ADOCs budget and how taxpayer money is being spent should be accompanied by a discussion of sentencing reform,” the statement said. “Targeted and evidence-based sentencing reform will ensure we are not unnecessarily incarcerating nonviolent Alabamians who pose no threat to public safety or Alabamians who need treatment for mental health issues or substance abuse.”

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said in a statement the Senate passed “a good General Fund budget.”

“We were able to fully fund state agencies, hire new state troopers, provide much-needed money to address mental health in our prisons, and pay back debt to the Alabama Trust Fund,” the statement said.

Other agencies [would see increases \(/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2018/02/14/state-employees-would-see-3-percent-pay-raise-budget/337608002/\)](#). Medicaid, which covers over 1 million people in the state – mostly children, the elderly and the disabled – would get a \$53.8 million increase over its current General Fund levels, a 7.6 percent increase. The Alabama Department of Mental Health would get an \$8.9 million increase, an 8.2 percent jump, and the Alabama Department of Human Resources, which administers most anti-poverty programs in the state, would get a 5 percent increase of \$3.1 million.

The state’s trial courts would get a \$2.8 million bump, a 2.7 percent increase. The budget also provides an extra \$3.2 million to the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency to hire 30 more state troopers.

“I think we’re in great shape in terms of the appropriations passed today,” Pittman said.

The budget hit a slight speed bump during debate on Tuesday afternoon. The General Fund for 2019 includes a \$2.7 million increase for the Alabama Therapeutic Education Facility (ATEF) in Columbiana, which provides rehabilitation services and vocational training for inmates, with an aim of reducing recidivism.

Sen. Bobby Singleton, D-Greensboro, offered an amendment that would provide \$4.7 million to a Perry County correctional facility to provide the same services in west Alabama. Pittman initially opposed the measure, not because of opposition to rehabilitation programs but an uncertainty about what the Perry County, sometimes considered for use by Corrections, might become.

“Until we realize what the end game is for this property, we need to be careful,” he said.

Pittman, who is not running for re-election, also voiced concern about the long-term health of the General Fund, including rising costs of programs, and paying outstanding debt. But Singleton said the state had carried debt for decades and found a way to fund services.



Sen. Bobby Singleton on the senate floor at the Alabama Statehouse in Montgomery, Ala., on Tuesday April 11, 2017. (Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)

“Even when these programs rise and rise, we meet the challenges,” he said.

The amendment passed 24 to 6. Pittman then threatened to bring several other amendments to the budget, but in the end only brought a single one increasing the Alabama Department of Transportation’s allocation by \$4.5 million. That passed 29 to 0.

Read or Share this story: <http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2018/02/20/senate-approves-general-fund-but-not-state-employee-raise/355703002/>