

Anger erupts during Senate General Fund debate

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What was an unremarkable debate over the General Fund budget exploded Thursday over accusations of poor budget prioritizing and state overreach.



Sen. Rodger Smitherman on the senate floor at the Alabama Statehouse in Montgomery, Ala., on Thursday May 4, 2017. (Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)

In the space of about 15 minutes, Sens. Rodger Smitherman, D-Birmingham and Phil Williams, R-Rainbow City began yelling at each other Thursday evening over a proposal from Williams to move funding from the Department of Tourism to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

After the parties retreated to neutral corners, Sen. Paul Sanford, R-Huntsville – defeated in an earlier attempt to cut state agencies to provide money for roads – had the 107-page bill read at length, delaying passage for hours.

"We've been having a debate about whether we been a gas tax," Sanford said during the debate on the amendment. "This was a way to give (the Alabama Department of Transportation) the tools necessary to meet the needs the state has."

The Senate approved the budget 23 to 4. It goes back to the House of Representatives, [who approved the budget in March](http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/03/14/alabama-house-rejects-bonuses-state-employees/99195832/) ([/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/03/14/alabama-house-rejects-bonuses-state-employees/99195832/](http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/03/14/alabama-house-rejects-bonuses-state-employees/99195832/)).

The explosions punctuated a long and tense day in the Senate which saw the chamber see difficult and lengthy debates over the budgets and [a redistricting bill](http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/05/04/ala-senate-approves-redistricting-map/101299678/) ([/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/05/04/ala-senate-approves-redistricting-map/101299678/](http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/05/04/ala-senate-approves-redistricting-map/101299678/)).

"We had two big lifts today, the reapportionment bill, expected to be a little contentious, and the budget following that," Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said Thursday evening. "Who knows why things go south? We got both of them done."

As is usually the case, senators brought several amendments seeking to move money around in the budget.

But it was the funding Williams proposed shifting -- \$600,000 from two Birmingham-area events -- that led to furious criticism from Smitherman, after a day in which Jefferson County Democrats fought unsuccessfully to establish party parity in the Jefferson County delegation.

"Get off our backs," Smitherman shouted at Williams. "I'm sick of it."

Williams shouted back at Smitherman, and a proposed compromise from Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur that would have taken the \$600,000 from a reserve intended to bail out Medicaid in the event of federal cuts made things worse.

"They're not going to take a dime from Medicaid," Smitherman said. "Start the clock. I'm ready to talk."

Tempers cooled after senators voted down the Williams amendment, but Sanford shortly after made his motion.

Drama for an ordinary budget

The General Fund, which pays for most noneducation services in the state, gets revenue from about three dozen sources, most of which post flat growth year-to-year. With growing costs in Medicaid and Corrections, and legislators unwilling or unable to increase existing revenue, the budget struggles to provide enough funding for services each year.

Alabama Medicaid -- which covers more than 20 percent of Alabamians, mostly children, the disabled and the elderly -- will float on about \$105 million in money from the state's share of the 2010 settlement over the BP oil spill. But that money will be gone the following year.

The budget includes \$95 million for reserves to make up the loss of the BP money in 2019. But legislators acknowledge that the money could go to address changes to federal funding for Medicaid or changes to other programs, including the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

Legislators also provided flat funding for the Department of Corrections; the Alabama Department of Mental Health and the Alabama Department of Human Resources. It does not provide pay raises to state workers -- who have not received a cost-of-living-adjustment since 2008 -- but increases the state's share of insurance funding from \$850 per employee per month to \$930 per employee per month.

The budget provides \$3.3 million to the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency to hire 30 additional state troopers, and provides modest increases of \$175,000 to the Alabama Department of Environmental Management -- which lost nearly all its General Fund money a few years ago -- and \$800,000 to the Forestry Commission.

The budget includes language to direct a proposed five percent increase in the price of liquor to provide an added \$8.2 million for the state's district attorneys and courts. Like other state agencies, district attorneys and courts have lost millions of dollars in the last 10 years. The Alabama Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) board [has not yet voted on the proposal \(/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2017/03/29/abc-board-gives-preliminary-ok-raising-liquor-price/99782504/\)](#).

DA's received about \$38 million in the 2008 General Fund; under the proposed budget, they get \$26 million. The state's trial courts, which got \$151.2 million from the General Fund in 2008, should get \$97.2 million in the budget.

Sen. Bill Holtzclaw, R-Madison, objected to the liquor price increase, saying it was a way for the Legislature to avoid taking responsibility for a tax vote. The Senate defeated the measure.



Sen. Phil Williams at the Alabama Statehouse in Montgomery, Ala., on Thursday May 4, 2017. (Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)



Sen. Paul Sanford at the Alabama Statehouse in Montgomery, Ala., on Thursday May 4, 2017. (Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)

Sanford's amendment was more controversial. By cutting state agencies 3.4 percent, the amendment would add \$63.5 million a year to ALDOT for road projects. Sanford argued it was a way to meet the state's infrastructure needs without raising the state's gas tax.

But the proposal drew criticism from Sanford's fellow Republicans, who said the across-the-board cuts overlooked the varying needs and conditions of different state agencies.

"When you cut everything equally across the board, not only is it not efficient but in other places, it doesn't make any sense," said Sen. Dick Brewbaker, R-Pike Road. "No one here believes we should be cutting Corrections 2.4 percent."

The amendment was defeated, but Sanford had the budget read later in the evening.

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