

Alabama Legislature enters last week with lots left

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The Alabama Legislature enters its final week in a familiar position: Losing time and facing divisions with major bills still pending.

Legislative leaders sounded confident last week that they could get that major legislation – a budget; redistricting and prisons -- out before what they hope will be adjournment on Thursday.

"We're running out of time and we've got a lot of pieces of legislation we need to address," said House Speaker Mac McCutcheon, R-Monrovia. "I hope we can get some legislation on the floor and go to work."

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McCutcheon and Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, held out the possibility staying an additional day if needed.

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“My preference would be to come back Friday,” he said. “We really want to try and get finished this week.”

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But getting there will require major divisions over those issues between Republicans and Democrats, particularly on the issue of redistricting. Democrats say new maps being drawn don't address concerns that led a federal court to strike down 12 of the state's districts as unconstitutional in January and that the large bill's reading length, consuming hours and hours of time.

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Other controversies could haunt the week. Republicans, who hold a supermajority in both chambers, clotured Democrats before a debate on a bill sponsored by Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, preventing public schools from spending money to campaign for public referenda.

While clotures are not unusual, filing motions before a debate starts is. Sen. Bobby Singleton, D-Greensboro, criticized the move, saying poor areas of his west Alabama district could not compete with large landowners who might oppose taxes to fund schools. Singleton threatened to have every bill read at length for the remainder of the session, saying afterward it was the only way he could ensure the needs of his district would be heard.

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Sen. Bobby Singleton, center, on the senate floor in Montgomery, Ala., on Tuesday April 18, 2017. (Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)

The Senate still needs to approve the House redistricting map – which took more than 18 hours to read at length over two days last week.



"The rules are all I have in terms of my voice," Singleton said. "There's a supermajority that can outvote me on any bill. They could have outvoted me on this bill I'm going to use the rules to every means I can."

Senate Minority Leader Quinton Ross, D-Montgomery, called Singleton's threat "extremely serious."

"We're a deliberative body, and we try to respect the process and negotiate in good faith," he said.

Marsh said he hoped to speak with Singleton over the weekend.

"He's very committed but I know when he's really mad," he said. "I don't think he's really mad."

Budgets

The Education Trust Fund still needs action in conference committee.

The best that can be said for the ETF is that it doesn't cut anything. The ETF is expected to grow a little more than one percent – about \$90 million – in the 2018 fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1. The budget as passed by the House provides a \$13.5 million increase to pre-kindergarten funding, will increase funding for 13,000 pre-kindergarten students and boosts direct funding to school districts.

But the education budget is otherwise flat, particularly for four-year colleges and higher education institutions, where rising costs in a veterans scholarship program ate up most of an expected bump.

Marsh and McCutcheon said they hoped to finish the budgets Tuesday or Wednesday.

Redistricting

While the parties are deeply divided over the maps, Republicans have shown no interest in changing them and express confidence they will survive an expected court challenge. Democrats say the maps essentially copy the old boundary lines, and have made a particular point about the divide in Jefferson County, where Republicans would hold a significant advantage in part by drawing in people who live outside the county. McCutcheon said the legislators could not make the map work without the division.



Sen. Roger Smitherman, D-Birmingham, discusses a Democratic proposal for redistricting in the Senate Tourism and Marketing committee on May 3, 2017. (Photo: Brian Lyman / Advertiser)

"We have spent a lot of time working with every member that was affected, and we have tried to get input from everybody, and we have also looked at everything the court has ordered," he said. "We feel like we have complied with that."

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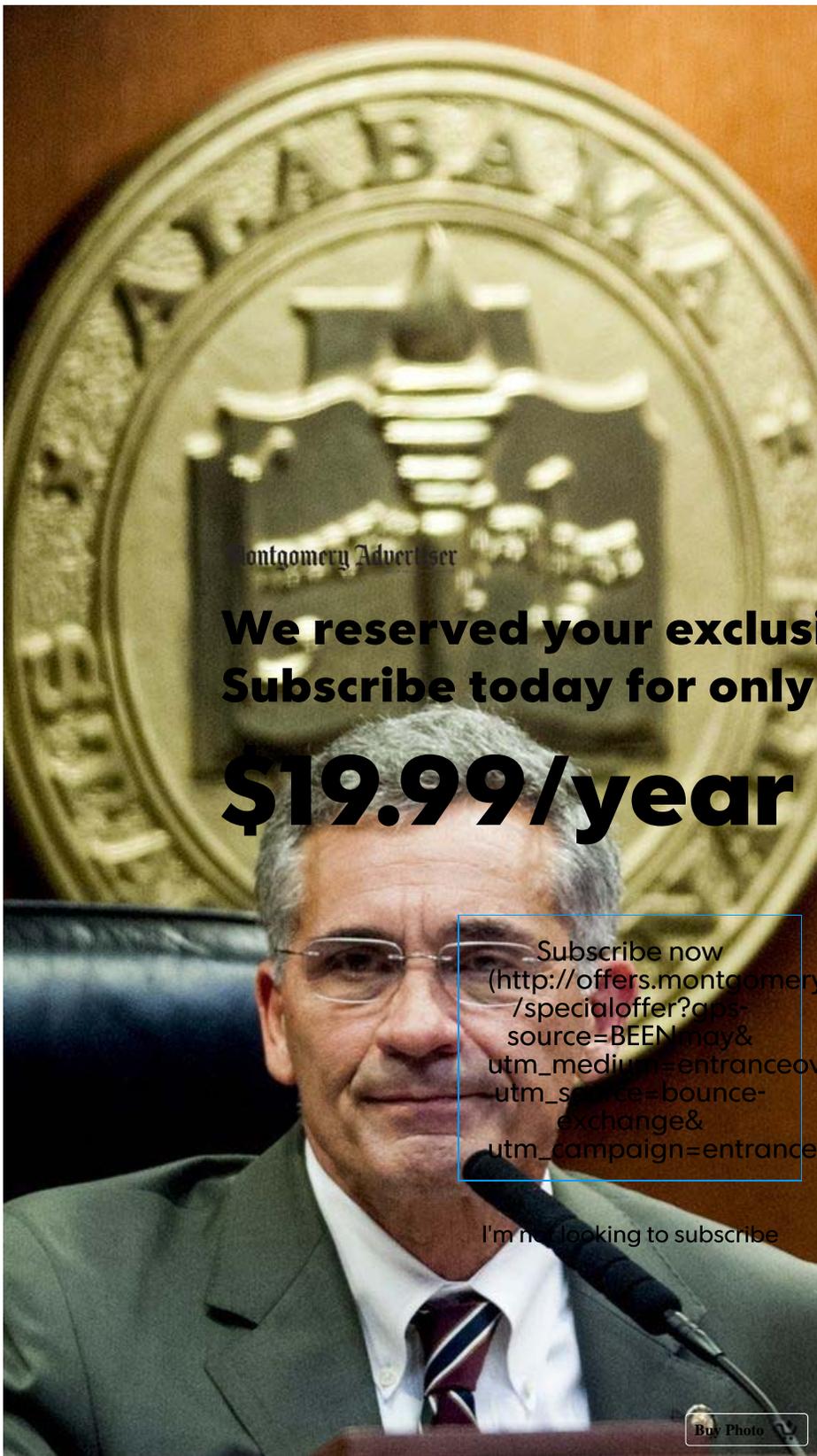
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Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, presides over the senate at the Alabama Statehouse in Montgomery, Ala., on Tuesday April 11, 2017. (Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)

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Democrats disagree, and after a marathon 16-hour reading of the House bill, said Republicans left them no choice in a map they say will not give their constituents a proper role in the political process.

"Y'all driving us into a corner," said Rep. John Rogers, D-Birmingham. "We've got to fight back."

The House and Senate have each approved their own redistricting maps and sent them to the opposite chamber. Motions to read the bills at length in either house could end up killing a great deal of legislation moving forward.

Prisons

A proposal to allow local communities to build new prisons the state would lease will need a late-minute push to get passage. Sponsors say the legislation will help address the prison overcrowding crisis in the state, but the House has been divided over the need for the project and the cost.

Autism

The session nearly blew up last week when Senate Finance and Taxation General Fund chair Trip Pittman, R-Montrose, attempted to withhold a bill that would require insurance coverage of autism therapies. Alabama is one of only a handful of states that does not already require coverage of the therapies, which can cost up to \$120 an hour. Parents of children with autism have fought hard for the bill and met equally strong opposition from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama, which says the legislation would increase costs.



Standing-room only during committee discussion on the autism insurance bill at the Alabama Statehouse in Montgomery, Ala., on Thursday May 4, 2017. (Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)

The bill was amended in committee that exclude firms that employ 50 people or less from the coverage, and restricting coverage for those 16 or younger. The bill could come for a vote Wednesday, and Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, whose daughter has autism, said they wanted to get it as close to a House version – without the age or employee limits – as possible.

"I'd like to go clean," he said. "Clean it up and then let's go up or down on all of them."

McCutcheon said he wanted to see the bill as soon as possible.

"This body has taken that issue very seriously and they're very supportive of it," he said. "They've heard from the families in Alabama."

Other bills

Legislation that passed the House decriminalizing midwifery and requiring more inspections of exempt day care centers still needs approval from the Senate. Marsh indicated their fate would depend on the decisions of Senate Rules Committee chairman Jabo Waggoner, R-Vestavia Hills.