

# Lawmakers hold special session on budget

By KIM CHANDLER and MARTIN SWANT | Posted: Monday, July 13, 2015 8:10 pm

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama legislators on Monday began a special session on a looming budget shortfall during which Gov. Robert Bentley will again try to persuade Republican legislators to support tax increases over deep cuts to government services.

Bentley is asking lawmakers to approve \$302 million in revenue. Alabamians would rather have "minimal" tax increases, Bentley argued, over slashing state services in the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

"They want to take care of mental health. They want their hospitals to stay open. The people of Alabama, I don't care how conservative they are, they want those services, and we have to fund them," the governor said. Bentley said legislators need to "step up" and show leadership.

Legislators met for about 15 minutes and then adjourned until Aug. 3, saying committees needed time to work on budget ideas. The opening day of the special session also came with a renewed push for gambling legislation which, like Bentley's tax bills, faces uncertain odds.

The regular session ended last month in a political stalemate and without a budget. Bentley was unable to persuade lawmakers to approve tax increases and vetoed a spending plan that would have slashed \$200 million from state agencies.

He faces an uncertain outlook in Round 2 with legislators.

House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, said the House will consider the governor's proposals, but that the House and Senate need to take responsibility moving forward.

"I believe that we will be working with the Senate in coming up with what we believe is a consensus and that we can get passed," Hubbard said. "And it's not to say that we're not going to keep the governor informed, but that's the way the separation of powers work. He is going to make some recommendations to us, but that's all they are, recommendations."

Hubbard said he has not seen the specifics of Bentley's proposals.

"I don't believe my members are inclined to vote for a bunch of new taxes," Senate President Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said before lawmakers convened.

The governor's proposals include a cigarette tax and an adjustment to the business privilege tax. He also wants lawmakers either to approve a soda tax or do away with the FICA tax deduction from state income taxes.

The opening day of the special session also highlighted ongoing differences between Bentley and Marsh.

Bentley is trying to head off discussions of gambling legislation, excluding it from his special session call. Marsh on Monday introduced legislation to legalize a lottery and casinos.

"I think if you check the temperature of the public, they are ready to vote on the issue one way or the other," Marsh said. Marsh said he is not looking at the bill as a solution to next year's shortfall, but said the state needs to have the conversation about gambling.

Marsh introduced similar legislation in the regular session. He never sought a Senate floor vote, however, since it was clear he did not have the 21 votes needed to pass a constitutional amendment.

The governor said he is not opposed to people voting on gambling at some point, but he said the state needs to look at budgetary changes first.

The special session can last for up to 30 calendar days. The governor said he is prepared for a Round 3, saying he will call lawmakers back for another special session if needed.

"We'll see what they do over the next 30 days. If it doesn't get solved, we'll come back in August," Bentley said.

Upon the House and Senate adjournment, acting finance director Bill Newton addressed a joint meeting of the bodies' budget committees. Afterward, Senate budget chair Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, didn't have high hopes.

"I think there are a lot of different forces at work in this special session. Any budget that properly funds state government will be difficult to fund properly," Orr said.