



Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley vetoes slashed budget

state house mug by julie.JPG

(Julie Bennett/jbennett@al.com)

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The Alabama Legislature will finish the 2015 legislative session without a General Fund budget enacted.

Lawmakers tonight passed a budget that officials said would force cuts in services and employee layoffs, but Gov. Robert Bentley sent it back with a veto.

The House of Representatives voted to override the veto, but the veto stands because the Senate had already adjourned for the session and had no chance to override.

The governor did not say when he would call lawmakers back for a special session. The 2016 fiscal year starts Oct. 1.

"I really will not bring the Legislature back until they have their minds right," Bentley said.

The budget he vetoed would have spent \$1.6 billion from the state General Fund, a reduction of \$200 million, 11 percent from this year.

It passed the Senate by a vote of 20-13, sending it back to the House of Representatives.

Senators then adjourned for the session, ending it after the 29th day, one day short of the allowed 30.

The House later concurred with the budget by a vote of 61-39, sending it to the governor.

The House had **passed a similar version last month**. Bentley said he would veto that budget, calling it "unworkable" and "irresponsible."

The latest version made only marginal changes to that House plan.

The governor has traveled the state for months seeking support for his \$541 million tax package, but it did not pass.

He has promised for weeks to call lawmakers back in for a special session if they failed to pass a budget that he believes adequately funds state services.

The budget passed tonight did not meet that standard, Bentley said.

"Everyone standing here tonight and every person in the state of Alabama somehow is touched by the General Fund," Bentley said. "And it's been an anemic budget for 70 years. And I was sent here to solve problems. The Legislature was sent here to solve problems."

Senate budget chairman Arthur Orr of Decatur acknowledged that the budget lawmakers passed was not sufficient.

"Our job is not done and we'll be back," Orr said. "At that time I hope we'll be able to come with a resolution that will adequately fund our state government."

Orr was one of five Republicans to vote against the budget, according to the Legislature's website.

Seven of the eight Senate Democrats voted against it, as did independent Sen. Harri Anne Smith of Slocomb.

"I think we have a number of senators that took a pledge that they were not going to raise any revenue," Sen. Billy Beasley, D-Clayton, said. "And I don't think you can come down here and close out all your options. The services that are provided to the people of Alabama by state agencies are vital."

Speaker Mike Hubbard said the House was placed in a difficult position by the Senate's decision to send down the budget and then adjourn.

He said the move to override the governor's veto, although it could not stand, showed that the House was trying to pass a budget.

"The worst thing to do is go home without a budget that's our constitutional duty, and I believe we did everything we could in the House," Hubbard said. "We offered solutions. They were rejected by the Senate."

The House GOP caucus proposed an increase in the cigarette tax and several others as a way to try to level fund next year's budget, but dropped the effort after being told it would fail in the Senate.

The Senate proposed moving \$100 million from the Education Trust Fund to the General Fund, but that effort failed.

The vetoed budget included a set of conditional appropriations spelling out how additional revenue above the \$1.6 billion would be allocated, such as if the Legislature approved tax increases during a special session.

There were \$95 million in first priority conditionals, including \$34 million for Medicaid; \$20 million for Corrections; a separate \$12 million for Corrections and Pardons and Paroles for prison reform; \$15 million for the court

system; \$8 million for the Department of Human Resources and \$5 million for Mental Health.

The House will return for a 30th and final legislative day but will be limited in what it can do with the Senate finished for the session.

Hubbard said the day will allow representatives to organize their committees.

Senate Minority Leader Quinton Ross, D-Montgomery, said people should be paying attention to the budget shortfall.

"While some have not felt the effects of it, we know that the deep cuts will cause people to lose jobs," Ross said. "We know the deep cuts will cause agencies to really have to cut back on the services that they provide. So it's a serious situation."

Bentley said gambling legislation would not be part of his proposals for a special session.

He said he planned to start to work Friday on special session plans and finding common ground with legislators.

"It's going to take a lot of hard work," Bentley said. "They're going to have to work with me on bringing everyone together. We need to work with the business community. We need to work with all stakeholders.

"And we need to work with individual legislators who have various ideas. Tomorrow I will start to have some ideas that we will put together as I talk to the legislators as we try to put all this together."

Staff writer Erin Edgemon contributed to this report.

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