

WINDOM GALLIHER

MONTGOMERY UPDATE

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Sen. Pittman's message: There will be blood

Legislators have a calm week, but a lean General Fund budget is coming soon

Week three of the regular session of the Alabama Legislature began with storm clouds, but ended its three legislative day workweek under sunny skies – matching the weather outdoors.

The Senate spent most of its time this week working on Sunset bills to reauthorize approximately 30 state agencies, boards and commissions.

The quiet in the Senate is sure to end quickly as new General Fund Budget chair Sen. Trip Pittman (R-Montrose) says he's bringing an austere budget next week.

On Tuesday, the House of Representatives launched into a multi-hour debate on a bill by Rep. David Faulkner (R-Mountain Brook) to prevent cities and counties from establishing minimum wage levels within their jurisdictions other than the one recognized by the state. Alabama, which does not have a minimum wage law, observes the federal rate of \$7.25 per hour.

Rep. Arnold Mooney (R-Birmingham) introduced the bill last year in the special session, but it failed to pass both chambers. Critics said the bill was in reaction to the Birmingham city council attempting to pass an ordinance to increase the minimum wage incrementally within the city limits. Birmingham enacted the ordinance, and the first hike it scheduled to take effect March 1 with a second hike slated for later this summer to ultimately raise the wage to \$10.10 per hour.

When a legislator handles a controversial bill, they can be chained to the podium for as long as the debate endures. It went on for about four hours, and Rep. Faulkner politely handled the questions



THERE'S A NEW SHERIFF IN TOWN FOR THE GENERAL FUND BUDGET IN THE SENATE, AND HIS NAME IS SEN. TRIP PITTMAN

and complaints – and more than a few slings and arrows – from the bill's opponents. Ultimately, the GOP supermajority cut off the debate and the House passed the bill primarily on party lines on a 71-31 vote.

Once Rep. Faulkner completed his turn at the microphone, he handed it off to Rep. Mooney, who was getting his second crack at a bill to put the state's right-to-work law into the constitution.

Last week, Rep. Mooney's bill fell three votes shy of the required number of 63 to pass a constitutional amendment, but procedurally the bill could be revived. A tense debate ensued on the reconsideration motion. As Rep. Mooney's bill was a part of the GOP's agenda, the votes were there to resuscitate the bill, and the supermajority invoked cloture on Democrats to cease the debate. With the bill back in position to pass, the House adjourned for the day.

It appeared Wednesday would be another tense day in the House as it began the day on a bill by Rep. April Weaver (R-Brierfield) to prohibit the unauthorized sale of unborn fetal parts. Democrats again railed against the legislation, but suddenly the filibuster fizzled, and the bill passed quickly. Rep. Mooney returned the microphone and his right-to-work bill passed quietly with little debate to end a long Wednesday that had plenty of committee work earlier in the day. Wednesday was one of those days that appeared headed for midnight but ended at 5:30 p.m. – proving once again that there's no way to predict the mood of the legislators.

Thursday's legislative action was sparse as the House failed to generate enough support on procedural votes to move on two bills sought by counties to change the way solid waste taxes are collected

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and how pay raises for county commissioners would be implemented. The longest debate of the day was on a bill by Rep. Alan Boothe (R-Troy) to amend state law on deer feeding. The bill ultimately passed 62-35.

Undoubtedly, legislators will their minds on money and money on their minds as they return to work — none more than Sen. Pittman. If it's another three-day week, the General Fund could come out of committee on Wednesday and be

eligible for a floor vote in the Senate on Thursday.

Sen. Pittman believes he has no choice but to bring the austere budget and do it early in the session to get the attention of legislators who have no appetite for new revenue — taxes.

We don't think it has sunk in yet with legislators but without taxes, there are basically three paths forward: 1) an Armageddon budget that could destroy Alabama's Medicaid program and other agencies, 2) taking the necessary money from the education budget — which is likely because of increased lobbying efforts from the higher education community, or 3) let the people vote on a lottery.

The House will return to work Tuesday with a special order calendar headed by two more of the GOP agenda bills — legislation that would expand wireless to the state's schools. Rep. Donnie Chesteen (R-Geneva) is the sponsor of the main piece of the package, while Rep. Bill Poole (R-Tuscaloosa) is handling the bill that funds the initiative.

In other news, the House welcomed its newest member Wednesday. Rep. Danny Crawford (R-Athens) was sworn into office following his victory over former Rep. Henry White. Rep. Crawford fills the unexpired seat of the late Rep. Dan Williams, who lost his battle with leukemia last year.

Note: The Windom Galliher Montgomery Update publishes weekly during the legislative session, monthly in the off-season, and as events warrant otherwise.