

WINDOM GALLIHER

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Was that a hint? It sure seemed like one

Column suggests Gov. Bentley may expand Medicaid

We couldn't help but notice when Chuck Dean of al.com broached the subject Tuesday with a column with an eye-catching title – *"Is Gov. Robert Bentley nudging Alabama toward expanding Medicaid?"*

The question of Medicaid expansion has been the elephant in the room of statewide politics since the adoption of the federal Affordable Care Act.

For those who support the major initiative of the Obama administration, it was viewed as a lure to get the states on board – millions and millions of new federal dollars that would be free at first and then require a 10 percent match after three years. For many of those in the health care industry in Alabama, despite its derision by many as "Obamacare," it was viewed as a lifeline to help bolster a struggling system in the state. Essentially, Medicaid expansion would allow those up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level (approximately \$16,000 annual income for a single person and \$32,000 for a family of four) to become eligible.

For the Republican supermajority – and for Gov. Bentley – it has been just another part of Obamacare. But for more than a year there have been whispers that for some Republicans, including the governor, a different view was emerging.



GOV. ROBERT BENTLEY HAS CRITICIZED THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT, BUT NOTED HE'S NEVER CALLED IT 'OBAMACARE.'

The presumed conclusion: bashing Medicaid expansion has been good politics, but perhaps not good policy. Democrats, though, badly outnumbered in the Legislature have pushed the issue to no avail – even as some Republicans have noted privately that Medicaid expansion makes sense.

That's why many were predicting that some time shortly after the 2014 general election that Gov. Bentley would opt to expand Medicaid. His major push for tax revenue seemed to reinforce those predictions. But the governor fell far short of his goals – gaining enough revenue to level-fund Medicaid and to kick-start reform plans that were developed in his first term.

But then Dean, the reporter considered closest to the Governor, offered up the subject in a column. Dean has written several columns that seemingly appear to be sounding boards for the Bentley administration, and

this latest one seems no different.

Our guess is that Dean is priming the pump for an announcement – perhaps much sooner rather than later – that Gov. Bentley will opt to expand Medicaid. The question is how would the state pay for its match. One rumor running around town this week was that the Governor could turn to a compact with the Poarch Band of Creek Indians as the source. Either way, now that Dean has broached the subject it's reasonable position to be on alert.

Either way, we suspect Gov. Bentley will avoid the phrase "Medicaid expansion," but rather use some clever code words, such as "reform," "partnership," and the like.

Remember from our history: Governor George C. Wallace never supported nor proposed any "tax increases," but he did favor "revenue enhancements."

Williamson prepares to change roles in health care debate

For almost a quarter century, Don Williamson has been the dominant voice in health care in Alabama. And for the past three, he's proven that and then some by shepherding not just one, but the two largest health care agencies in state government.

In less than 10 days, he'll change hats, but we rather suspect his impact will continue to be felt.

Dr. Williamson formally departs his primary job of the past 23 years as State Health Officer, which is the official title of the head of the Alabama Department of Public Health, to become the president of the Alabama Hospital Association. He'll no longer be the state's "health care czar" – his unofficial title as a he concurrently ran the ADPH and the Medicaid agency – but his voice will remain a strong one.

Friends and colleagues saluted his service to the state at a reception Tuesday night. He'll leave his current job at the end of the month, and start his new one in early November.

By definition, the State Health Officer is expected to be a leading voice on health care issues. Dr. Williamson showed what the standard should be. His word was considered gold to almost all legislators. He was always prepared, never threatening, but always straightforward on the consequences of health care decisions. His reputation grew even stronger during his three-year work as Medicaid "overseer." When he arrived, Medicaid was in a mess. It takes a special person to run that agency – one that not only understands health care, but also politics ... and how to run a massive state agency ... and how Medicaid works with its interplay with the federal government. Dr. Williamson brought all those skills to that job, and has done well in preparing Stephanie Azar for the future as she takes over there.

To say it's a huge loss for state government would be a



DR. DON WILLIAMSON, WHO IS LEAVING HIS POSITION AS STATE HEALTH OFFICER AFTER 23 YEARS, ENJOYED GREAT CREDIBILITY WITH LAWMAKERS

TEN-MINUTE CALENDAR

gross understatement, but undoubtedly his fount of knowledge will continue to be tapped by legislators – especially those who craft budgets.

The curious case of Artur Davis

The only word that applies here is "curious." For the past six years, Artur Davis has wandered in a political wilderness, and if he's fated for the biblical version of the journey, he has 34 years to go.

With a Harvard education (undergrad and law) and credentials as a former assistant U.S. Attorney, the Montgomery native/then-Birmingham resident had the profile to attract a wide swath of voters. His first race for Congress was against long-time incumbent Earl Hilliard in 2000. Davis lost that race, but avenged that defeat in 2002 and won re-election easily three straight times. He was the first non-Illinois congressman to endorse Barack Obama in 2008, and he gave a seconding speech for then Sen. Obama at the Democratic National Convention.

Many had Davis slated for a cabinet job – perhaps even Attorney General. He was going places. But where Davis really wanted to go was home to be Alabama's first African-American governor, and that pursuit has proven to be his political undoing. Even so, he began the race as the presumptive front-runner in the Democratic primary in 2010 as the African-American vote took more of a dominant role in the process. On top of that, there was a desire of many Democrats to project a new face in Alabama politics, and that perhaps "old times there" could be forgotten.

Davis took his front-runner position to heart and, generally, for granted. In 2009, he started to move away from President Obama, casting the first of two major votes against the Affordable Care Act. He did it again in 2010 when the bill became law.

Presumably, this was done to court white votes in – particularly in the general election. The votes would be fatal. Democrats – particularly African-Americans – were enraged that he abandoned the nation's first African-American president on his signature legislative agenda. Agriculture commissioner Ron Sparks pummeled Davis by a 62-38 percent margin in the Democratic primary.

In 2012, out of Congress and frozen out of Democratic politics, Davis doubled down. He spoke about President

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Davis

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Obama, but this time as a Mitt Romney supporter at the Republican National Convention. Even as President Obama won re-election, Davis declared himself a Republican and kicked the tires on running for Congress from Virginia. He never pulled the trigger.

Earlier this year, Davis announced a return to politics in a non-partisan. He would be running for mayor of his hometown of Montgomery. Interestingly enough, Davis didn't even live in Montgomery at the time. Or even Alabama. He was still residing in Virginia, but was making plans to return to his hometown to challenge incumbent Todd Strange.

Davis self-financed his move back home and his race for mayor. As it turned out, Davis was one of four challengers to Mayor Strange, who had won easily in a special election in 2009 and re-election in 2011. Only one of the other challengers was deemed credible – first-term county commissioner Dan Harris.

With a population of 56 percent African-American, the day is coming soon when Montgomery will elect an African-American mayor. At least, so thought Davis who gambled that it would be him in 2015. It didn't happen that way. Using his own money, Davis took off after Strange saying that poor neighborhoods struggled even more so under the incumbent's leadership, while developers benefited from special treatment.

Few bought what was Davis was selling. Mayor Strange cruised to re-election with 57 percent, and confirmed it would be his final term. Davis, for all his money he spent, garnered 27 percent and Harris came in at 11 percent.

On election night, Davis was not particularly gracious and immediately announced his plans to run again for



STATE DEMOCRATIC EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE REJECTS BY FORMER CONGRESSMAN ARTUR DAVIS TO REJOIN PARTY

mayor in four years. He's not the first candidate to do so. But within 24 hours, he was contacting politicians and lobbyists, seeking their support for yet another race – against Harris for the county commission in 2016. In a Democratic district, it would mean Davis would have to “repent” of his Republican sins and return faithfully to the party he abandoned in 2012 and worked against as late as 2013.

Last Saturday, Davis sought reinstatement to the Democratic Party before the state's executive committee. He was seeking a waiver from the “Radney Rule,” which states candidates on the Democratic Party ticket shall not have run nor supported candidates from another party in the past four years.

The executive committee overwhelmingly rejected Davis' petition. The wounds of 2009 and 2010 may be older now, but they are still quite raw. Davis says he'll take the party to court to fight his way onto the ballot. Even if he gains the ballot, there's no guarantee that he could beat Harris in a primary. Davis hangs his hat on the fact that he led Harris in the mayoral race in the boxes that comprise the county commission district. The issue: would the same voters show up for a Democratic pri-

mary next March? Davis may be banking on support that's just not there. It wouldn't be the first time for him to do that.

House members unlikely to topple Speaker Hubbard

As Speaker of the House Mike Hubbard (R-Auburn) prepares for his upcoming trial next spring, the first public whispers from some members of his caucus finally were uttered calling for a change.

Rep. Phil Williams (R-Huntsville) offered himself up as a candidate for the office of Speaker. Anyone that has the notion of trying to oust Speaker Hubbard will have to wait until February when the next regular session begins. Rep. Williams initially said he would be a more conciliatory leader and be willing to work with both parties. Some interpreted Rep. Williams' comments as meaning that he would be willing to chart his path to the Speaker's chair with Democrats' votes. Since former Speaker of the House Seth Hammett's reign, the majority caucus (Democrats at the time) has settled on its candidate for the office and outvoted the minority in the race.

In 2010, Hubbard was tapped by the Republican caucus and was elected Speaker. Republicans stood with him in 2014, even though he had been indicted two weeks before the general election. In the caucus, Speaker Hubbard gained all but a few votes. In the formal election, he was unopposed and was the unanimous selection of the full House.

While a few have joined Rep. Williams in calling for a change, it appears Republicans will continue to stand with Speaker Hubbard, who was the architect of their overwhelming legislative victories in 2010 and 2014. As reporters attempted to poll caucus members following Rep. Williams' announcement, the depths and breadth of the support for Speaker Hubbard shone through.