

The Clay Times-Journal (Lineville, Ala.)
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Clay County Journalism student studies the County's Legislators

LEGISLATURE 1 / Luker / February 2011

By Abby Luker

With the March 1 opening of the Legislature's regular session growing near, Clay County legislators said two topics remain top priorities: schools and jobs.

Budget hearings in Montgomery Feb. 8-10 gave legislators a clue on how much funding will be available to the state during the 2011-2012 fiscal year, which will run Oct. 1 through Sept. 30.

"It's much worse than we anticipated," said Rep. Richard Laird, D-Roanoke, "but the figures are still very fluid."

With federal stimulus money having run out and no more coming in, Alabama is looking at, overall, having more than \$500 million less than was available during the 2010-2011 fiscal year, Laird said.

Under the state constitution, state spending cannot exceed state revenue, leaving cuts in spending necessary.

But with the session lasting until mid-June, Laird said, where those cuts will be made will not be known until around June 6 at the earliest.

Sen. Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, said he is determined to keep Clay County schools' reading and math and science initiative programs intact.

Maintaining the programs and others will be possible, Laird said, but with

the state facing the possibility of proration cuts of 3 to 5 percent in the education fund, "minor tweaks may need to be made."

"Alabama has come a long way," Laird said. "We're now at 25th, up from 49th, in the nation, educationally speaking, and we're all just going to have to learn to give and take to maintain our rankings."

Due in part to the state's increase in sales tax revenues from August through January, there is belief of a small chance the state may escape educational proration, Dial said. But to make it a reality, that revenue growth must continue, which means the state must create more jobs.

"All of it's equated," Dial said. "When you have a job, you get a check, and then you pay bills. With those bills come income tax and sales tax, and then that goes into education."

Job prospects are not looking good anywhere in the state due to the risk of General Fund cuts of up to 20 percent, Laird said. He said Central Alabama, never having had a great deal of money, is in even worse shape because little money will be available to provide an incentive for new businesses to come into the region.

But with talk of Kia Motors suppliers considering branching out into Clay and surrounding counties and Mando Corp., a

Korean automobile equipment manufacturer, into Roanoke, Dial said he is staying optimistic.

As chairman of the Broadband Advisory Committee created by former Gov. Bob Riley, Dial said a bright spot is state plans to expand high-speed Internet access through the installation of a fiber optic pipeline.

According to Dial, the pipeline, which will run alongside railroad beds for faster installation, will connect to a cable in Freeman, Ga., and run toward Birmingham and back to the Ashland and Wedowee areas, covering Central Alabama.

"That's the biggest thing we've got going for us," Dial said. "The grants have already been awarded, and now we're just waiting for the project to be finished. Hopefully, it won't take long, and new jobs can open up as soon as possible."

Future jobs, Dial said, will "rely less on making widgets and more on the service area," allowing people to work from their homes - a convenience possible through the Internet.

*Troy University journalism student Abby Luker wrote this story as part of a project partly funded by the Alabama Press Association Journalism Foundation.

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