

Officials expect smoother road for Legislature this year

By Mary Sell Montgomery Bureau | Posted: Thursday, January 7, 2016 12:00 am

MONTGOMERY — After three contentious legislative sessions last year, political watchers and officials are looking for a smoother road to a General Fund budget this year.

Still, the session that starts Feb. 2 likely will not be without controversy.

Here's a look ahead at state politics this year.

The session

“(Gov. Robert) Bentley will continue to be the independent governor, probably trying to work to leave a bit of a legacy,” Athens State political science professor Jess Brown said. “But I also think that in light of what happened last year, he’ll probably try to do some things to re-establish a better relationship with the Legislature.”

Last year, Bentley proposed \$541 million in new taxes, which led to six months of budget debate in the Statehouse. This year, Bentley is making no such pushes.

Bentley spokeswoman Jennifer Ardis said he favors a gas tax increase to support road infrastructure improvements — which some Republicans are discussing — but it's not something he's recommending.

“He will present a balanced budget to the Legislature, and it will be up to them to do what they're constitutionally required to do: pass a budget,” Ardis said. “The governor's budget will not include any revenue-raising measures.”

His specific agenda plans will be released during his Feb. 2 State of the State address.

“He has some very bold plans for his remaining three years in office,” Ardis said.

In the House, the Republican majority still is crafting its agenda of top-priority bills. House Majority Leader Rep. Micky Hammon, R-Decatur, said this week he couldn't yet talk about details.

“I think we will do our absolute best to get this done in one session this time,” Hammon said. “I can't guarantee that. There are a lot of pieces to the puzzle, but that's our goal.”

The General Fund budget, about \$1.7 billion this year, will be a challenge. Lawmakers already are predicting revenue shortfalls.

“They Band-Aided the problem last year, but they did not fix it,” Brown said.

A bill already has been pre-filed in the Senate to un earmark \$400 million from five agencies and put it in the General Fund, giving lawmakers more flexibility. But some argue that change doesn't generate any additional money for the General Fund.

In the Senate, President Pro Tem Sen. Del Marsh has said he'll propose a pay raise for teachers, but has said it will come with accountability measures and tenure law changes.

Unlike last year, Marsh, R-Anniston, has said he won't sponsor legislation to allow casino-style gaming in the state.

Medicaid expansion

For more than a year, Bentley has hinted at Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act. In recent months, he's said coverage for more Alabamians can't happen without more state funding.

“Medicaid expansion is all related to funding, and at this point there is no long-term funding available,” Ardis said this week.

Bentley's office estimates the state's expansion cost would be \$710 million during the next six years on top of a Medicaid program the state already is struggling to fund.

But there is a well-organized effort to encourage expansion, including a recommendation to do so by the task force of medical professionals and others Bentley assembled last year.

“I think Medicaid expansion is just a matter of time,” Brown said. “There is always going to be a faction in the Republican Party who will oppose it, who aren't going to be quiet about it ... but I think most of them will eventually come around to quiet acceptance.”

Hubbard trial

When lawmakers convene for the first day of the Legislative session, there could be a move to replace Rep. Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, as House speaker.

Hubbard faces 23 ethics charges accusing him of using his public offices — both as speaker and in his former position as chairman of the Alabama

Republican Party — to drum up investments and business for his companies. He said he is innocent. The charges came in fall 2014, and House membership in early 2015 appointed Hubbard to a second four-year stint as speaker.

In October, Rep. Phil Williams, R-Huntsville, said he would challenge Hubbard for the speakership.

Hubbard's trial has been tentatively set for late March. Last week, his lead attorney, Mark White, and others on White's team, filed a motion to withdraw from the case. No reason was given, The Associated Press reported. White issued a statement saying it was unrelated to the merits or status of the case.

2016 elections

Alabamians are less than two months from voting for a Republican or Democratic presidential candidate.

The primaries will be March 1, earlier than in previous contests. Alabama and several other Southern states united for an earlier primary in hopes of drawing more interest from candidates. It's being called the SEC Primary.

"I don't think the dust has settled, but if the primary were tomorrow, I think that the state would support Donald Trump," Brown said.

Thirteen Republicans and five Democrats qualified in November to have their names on the primary ballots.

In the U.S. House races, incumbent Rep. Robert Aderholt, of Haleyville, is being challenged in District 4 by fellow Republican Phil Norris. Mo Brooks in District 5 doesn't have a Republican challenger. Will Boyd Jr. is the lone Democrat running in the 5th District.

Longtime U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby, of Tuscaloosa, has four GOP challengers: John Martin, Shadrack McGill, Jonathan McConnell and Marcus Brown. Two Democrats, Charles Nana and Ron Crumpton, also have qualified.

Other state elections this year include several Alabama Supreme Court seats, though only one is contested. Tom Parker is challenged by Donna Beaulieu. Both are Republicans.

In the Public Service Commission president contest, Republican Twinkle Cavanaugh is being challenged in the primary by Terry Dunn.

Jeff Newman, a Republican on the state school board, will face two Republicans, Jim Bonner and Rhea Tays Fulmer, in March. The contested District 7 includes Franklin, Colbert, Lauderdale, Lawrence and a portion of Limestone counties.