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# Gov. Bentley calls special session to discuss statewide lottery

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By John Shryock, Digital Content Producer CONNECT

MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) - Gov. Robert Bentley released a video Wednesday morning announcing his intention to call a special session of the Alabama Legislature to address the state's funding crisis. On the agenda is a possible statewide lottery.

"I am calling a special session...to solely focus on solving Alabama's funding crisis," Bentley said. "The issue I will put before the Alabama Legislature is simple. I am asking that each legislator allow the people back home the right to vote on a statewide lottery."

[**READ MORE:** [Lottery could be major topic in special session](#)]

"As you know," the governor said, "most of our neighboring states have lotteries. And Alabamians are some of their best customers. It's time we stopped supporting other states' budgets and keep our money at home to solve our own problems."

The governor estimates a lottery could bring in \$225 million annually.



Alabama's last Democratic governor, Don Siegelman, successfully took the office on a campaign promise to create a statewide education lottery. Despite winning the office, his plan was voted down in 1999. But after nearly two decades, even Republicans - once ardently against the idea of a lottery - have softened their stance.

"Montgomery doesn't have all the answers," Bentley said. "Let's hear from the people of this great state on whether the time has come to approve a statewide lottery..."

What would the lottery earnings go toward? That's yet to be settled.

Gov. Bentley says he'd like to see it "help fund essential state services for our children, our elderly, those with mental illness, and those who are in most need, as well as the men and women in law enforcement."

That conflicts with a statement by House Minority Leader Craig Ford (D) who posted a statement to Facebook less than a day earlier explaining why he believes the money should go toward education scholarships, not to save Medicaid or to help the General Fund.

Asked for comment, Acting House Speaker Victor Gaston's office issued this statement:

*“The governor has not outlined his plan to legislators in any detail, nor, to my knowledge, has he even set a concrete start date for the special session, so it is difficult to comment with so little information at hand. I hope that the governor reaches out to lawmakers over the next several weeks in order to seek their input on any lottery proposal that comes forward and to do the prep work that is necessary for any special session to be successful.”*

Auditor Jim Zeigler, a vocal opponent of the governor on multiple issues, and who is **suing the Bentley administration** over BP settlement money spending, wants answers on safeguards for no-bid contracts to the lottery commission as well as details on how to prevent revenues from being "siphoned off for Bentley pet projects..."

The governor says his proposal will be for a lottery "with no other gambling included". His plan would also create a lottery commission to oversee the operation once it has started.

Senator Quinton Ross released the following statement on Wednesday in reference to the announcement:

*“We are pleased that the governor has decided to entertain legalized gaming after Democrats have been pushing the issue for years,” said Alabama Senate Minority Leader Quinton T. Ross Jr. (D-Montgomery). “We need to legalize and tax our existing gaming facilities, as well as create a statewide lottery so our state can adequately fund and expand our struggling Medicaid system and properly support our underfunded educational system. These gaming dollars can provide stability and long-term economic streams for many of our General Fund and Education Trust Fund needs.*

*It is estimated that \$250 million a year leaves Alabama and goes into the coffers of nearby states where gaming is legal, such as Georgia, Florida, Mississippi and Tennessee.*

*We need to benefit from the millions of dollars spent by Alabamians who patronize other states through their gaming facilities and lotteries; and we agree with Gov. Bentley that it is time to allow the people of Alabama to decide the issue once and for all by allowing them to vote,” Sen. Ross said. “With the governor’s lead, I hope our Republican colleagues will finally support and approve gaming for Alabama.”*

If lottery legislation passes the legislature, it will be placed on the ballot for Alabama citizens to give final approval.

Not all lawmakers believe Bentley's statement that he made on Wednesday.

Rep. John Knight called the announcement a "PR stunt" and that there have been no meaningful conversations on a lottery.

Rep. Reed Ingram says he does not believe Bentley has enough votes to pass a state lottery right now, and that is why he has not announced any dates.

Both representatives say they have not been contacted by the governor's office. Also both lawmakers feel that they could not support the lottery until the exact details of the policy are released.

Bentley campaigned for the governor's office with a promise to let the people decide whether to support a lottery. In the years since his election, he's come under criticism from some who say he's broken that promise.

"I've always said I would not stand in the way of the people's right to vote on a lottery," Bentley explained. "We have not solved our funding crisis yet. Now I am giving you, our people, the opportunity to fix this."

Gov. Bentley said he plans to travel the state and talk to voters about supporting his plan. The specific date for the special session has not yet been announced.

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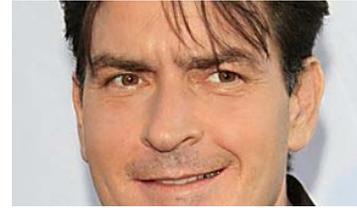
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