

# Budget agreement may not stop service cuts

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Alabama legislators averted a possible government shutdown last week when they approved a state budget for 2016, but some state agencies may not be out of the woods yet.

State officials couldn't say with certainty Friday that the new \$1.75 billion General Fund budget would prevent shutdown of state parks, driver's license offices or National Guard armories, closures many predicted in the heat of the budget debate.

"There will undoubtedly be closures. We should have a clearer picture next week," Spencer Collier, director of the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, wrote in an email Friday. Collier's agency is in charge of the state's driver's license offices, all but four of which were threatened with closure at the height of the budget impasse.

Lawmakers and Gov. Robert Bentley were at odds for most of this year over how to remedy the problems of the state's General Fund, which was originally projected to have a \$200 million shortfall. Last week, just 13 days before the start of the fiscal year, Bentley signed into law a budget that included \$60 million in new cigarette taxes, \$83 million in cuts and a sizable transfer from the state's separate schools budget.

Earlier this year, though, legislators were seriously considering much larger cuts. State department heads responded with dire projections. Most state parks, including Cheaha, would have shut down, state officials warned at the time. As many as 25 National Guard armories would close, officials warned.

Now that the budget is complete, state parks officials still aren't sure whether the threat to parks has passed.

"We haven't determined that yet," said parks director Greg Lein. Lein said a decision on park closures would be made sometime this week, after parks officials review the numbers.

The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which oversees the parks, doesn't even appear in the General Fund budget. It gets its money largely from fees earmarked just for conservation.

The new budget, however, requires a \$3 million transfer from Conservation to the General Fund, and Parks Division accountant Thomas Dunlap said the park system is the only unit in the department with money available to pay that.

"We're the only one with a little reserve left," Dunlap said. "Our goal is not to close anything, but it's a



The State House

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serious matter.”

The new budget also includes a provision that would withhold the department’s earmarked money if any park with overnight hotel facilities closes in 2016. That would seem to protect Cheaha State Park — which has chalets, cabins and a hotel — from closure this year.

The budget bill also states that it’s the “intent” of the Legislature to keep all driver’s licenses offices open in 2016. Collier, in his email, wrote that ALEA’s legal unit is researching the implications of the “intent” language.

Earlier this month, Maj. Gen. Perry Smith of the Alabama National Guard told lawmakers that some Guard armories would have to close. At the time, lawmakers were considering cuts of about \$600,000 to the Military Department.

The final budget cuts that department by \$478,000. Lt. Col. Shannon Hancock, the public affairs officer for the Guard, said the department is still reviewing the budget to see what it will do.

One of the seemingly hardest-hit programs may not see any changes in service at all. The bulk of the cuts in the General Fund came from the Department of Public Health, which shrank by \$59 million according to the budget spreadsheet.

It’s an accounting mirage. The federal government will begin picking up the tab for the state’s health insurance program for children in 2016, a \$47 million obligation. That federal largesse will also free up \$11 million the department had on hand to fund the program.

The true cut to Public Health, director Don Williamson said, is less than \$1 million. Restaurant inspections, one of the services that could have been slowed down under a more austere budget, will proceed at their normal pace, Williamson said.

“I don’t expect any interruption in services,” he said.

For Lein, the parks director, there’s another post-budget worry. After months of warnings about park closures, he said, there’s a chance people will assume the parks are already closed and avoid them — deepening any money problems the department.

“If you want to help the parks, go visit them,” he said.