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Washington update

Just back from its long Memorial Day break, Congress is now working on specific bills to cut programs as directed by the 2006 budget resolution, passed April 28. The measure will also allow \$100 billion in new tax cuts, \$70 billion of which can be passed by a simple majority vote in the Senate without fear of filibuster.

The following are some of the projected cuts in services for low-income people:

- Medicaid – \$10 billion cut over five years. House may cut further;
- Other mandatory programs such as TANF, SSI, Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), child care, foster care, child support collections – at least \$25 billion in cuts. Ways & Means will determine where and how much;
- Agriculture-related programs (such as Food Stamps and farm subsidies) – \$3 billion in cuts. Do not expect major cuts in farm subsidies.

Committees must produce bills for these cuts by September 16. Watch for details.

– Mary Weidler, senior policy analyst

Tax reform workshop

Huntsville – Sun Aug 7, 1 p.m.
Unitarian-Universalist Church.

Report

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June 10, 2005

Legislative wrap-up

Session ends with a dull thud

By Ron Gilbert, policy analyst

The Senate filibuster that kept the gears of lawmaking jammed for much of the 2005 regular session held out to the end. At midnight on May 16th, Lt. Governor Baxley gavelled the Senate to final adjournment – and the session to a close – with many bills still pending. The House of Representatives had adjourned earlier that night in frustration over the lack of substantive action in the other chamber.

The Legislature failed to carry out its only constitutional mandate, which is to pass both the Education Trust Fund (ETF) and the General Fund (GF) budget acts. Although the ETF budget passed both houses in early May, the GF budget never came to a Senate vote on the final day. This failure forces the Governor to convene a special session before the next fiscal year begins on October 1.

Political infighting and partisanship marked the 2005 session from the beginning. Excluding resolutions, sunset provisions and local measures, the Legislature enacted only 17 bills, six of which comprise the education spending plan for FY 2006. One controversial bill, which removes telephone services from regulation by the Public Service Commission, received final approval on May 3. Arise was successful in passing three amendments to the bill that provide protections to consumers and should ensure the availability of affordable telephone service to rural customers.

Among other bills enacted during the session were:

- A measure to strengthen Alabama's open meetings law;
- A supplemental appropriation to the Department of Public Health that allowed the state to continue to provide life-sustaining medications to AIDS patients;
- A bill to allow voters in each county to decide whether to extend limited home rule measures to their respective county commissions;
- A bill that restricts the sale of over-the-counter drugs used in the production of methamphetamines.

Among measures that died during the session, other than the General Fund, were:

- A bill that would have required "issue organizations" to disclose their contributors, which Arise has always done voluntarily (A Senate filibuster over this bill consumed more than a third of the session.);
- A bill that would have prohibited PAC-to-PAC transfers;
- A proposed amendment that would remove racist language from the state's constitution;
- A measure to clarify that attorneys representing indigent clients could receive reimbursement for overhead expenses;
- An amendment to allow the use of gasoline taxes and road use fees for public transportation programs

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A few words from Kimble —

Can the Alabama Senate redeem its do-nothing image in the upcoming special session?

The *Anniston Star* recently offered its recipe for a “truly special” session that would not only pass a General Fund Budget but also improve accountability and justice in our state.

In addition to passing the General Fund, the *Star* proposes that the Governor add three items to his call:

- A ban on PAC-to-PAC transfers — passed already by the House;
- A disclosure requirement for contributions to advocacy campaigns by non-profits — passed already by the House;
- An amendment removing racist language from our state constitution — passed by both Senate and House in 2004 but defeated in referendum.

Are these poverty issues? Only Amendment Two won Arise’s support, and we only addressed it last October after the right-wing opposition surfaced. But the more we learn about hundreds of thousands of dollars funneled into Alabama referendum campaigns by Washington lobbyists, national anti-tax organizations and out-of-state gambling interests, the more we begin to think that this issue deserves public scrutiny.

We have been pleased when news reports, as well as legislators, have lifted Arise as an example of a group that is not ashamed to list its donors. Today I wrote an op-ed disputing the Christian Coalition’s John Giles, who claimed that “All issue advocacy organizations such as ours — whether they are conservative or liberal — oppose such disclosure.” The sooner disclosure comes, the better our chance of passing tax and constitutional reform.

With peace,

We appreciate our contributors!

June 30th marks the end of Arise’s budget year. It’s been a year of remarkable achievements. Our first statewide conference drew a capacity crowd. The legislative session saw three Alabama Arise bills pass committee — while our input helped protect low-income citizens from higher fees for basic phone service. And we’ll soon be sending our *Alabama Tax & Budget Handbook* to the printer!

These activities wouldn’t be possible without the support of our contributors. ACPP thanks the following individuals and organizations for their generous gifts received between April 15 and May 26, 2005:

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Legislative wrap-up

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(This bill received a favorable report from the House Government Finance and Appropriations Committee following testimony from Arise members and other transportation advocates. It was placed on special order calendars for three consecutive days, but filibusters and delaying tactics on unrelated bills kept the measure from receiving a floor vote in the House.);

- A bill that would detail rights and responsibilities for Alabama’s landlords and tenants (The bill received a favorable report from the Senate

Judiciary Committee but was caught in the continuing Senate filibuster and never received a floor vote);

- Critical supplemental appropriations to a number of state agencies, including the Department of Corrections;
- A number of bills to implement recommendations of the Alabama Sentencing Commission.

Governor Riley has not yet indicated when he anticipates calling the Legislature into special session. While the regular session left many pressing issues unaddressed, it appears unlikely that the Governor’s call for the special session will target anything more controversial than the General Fund budget.