

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

ROBERT BENTLEY
GOVERNOR



STATE CAPITOL
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 36130

STATE OF ALABAMA

State of the State Address
February 7, 2012
Governor Robert Bentley

Lieutenant Governor Ivey, Speaker Hubbard, President Pro Tem Marsh, distinguished guests, members of the Legislature and my fellow Alabamians:

It is in indeed an honor to join you in this Chamber as we reflect on a year of historic events and cast a bold vision for the future of our state.

To members of my Cabinet thank you for your service and for meeting the challenges we face as a state with courage and the hearts of servant leaders. It is a privilege to work with each of you.

Chief Justice Malone, distinguished members of the Alabama Supreme Court – thank you for your leadership and your service to our state.

As we reflect on the first year of my administration and chart a course for the future, I want us all to remember, state government belongs to the people of this state. As public servants chosen to lead this state, we must begin every day with a commitment to give Alabamians every opportunity to make their lives better.

The people of this state expect us to make tough decisions in tough times. They expect us to come together, to work together to create jobs, to give our children the best education and to improve our quality of life.

As we face the days ahead, we must have the courage to make difficult decisions, we must have compassion for the people we serve, and we must work together to improve the lives of all Alabamians.

The first time we met together, right here in this historic chamber, I pledged to do all I could to put Alabamians back to work.

As I stand before you tonight, I'm pleased to report that since we took office, 41 thousand more Alabamians are working. That's 41 thousand more Alabamians earning a paycheck today than a year ago. And more jobs are on the way.

We have recruited over 13,000 new, future jobs to Alabama. International companies from India, Germany and Japan and right here in the United States are investing more than 3 point 2 billion dollars in our state and in our people.

And just today there was more good news. A Chinese company will bring up to 500 new jobs to Wilcox County where we have the highest unemployment rate in the state.

In the last four months Alabama's unemployment rate has dropped faster than any other state in the nation.

We've done this despite facing tough competition from other states and with limited ability to offer incentives to businesses.

So why are national and international business leaders choosing to invest in Alabama? They recognize that Alabama has the strongest business climate, best work force training, and the hardest working people they will find anywhere.

They also know that our leaders at every level of government and our local economic developers take a team approach to putting Alabamians back to work.

There is no better example of that than what we did to help the town of Hackleburg. We all remember what happened in April. This community of 1,400 people in Northwest Alabama was devastated by the storms. Twenty-five people were killed. The schools were demolished. 150 homes were lost. And the Wrangler Distribution Center, the town's largest employer, was destroyed.

We knew if those critical jobs at Wrangler were not restored, there was little hope for saving this community.

The mayor, the county commissioners, local legislators, and our Alabama Development Office helped me with one common goal – saving the community.

And our teamwork paid off. Wrangler executives heard our message and agreed to not only rebuild in Hackleburg, but to expand from 150 jobs to 250 jobs for the community. I want to thank everyone for a job well done.

When I took office, I learned that despite our previous success in recruiting new industry to our state, we did not have a comprehensive, statewide economic development plan to guide our efforts. That's why I created the Alabama Economic Alliance made up of economic development leaders from communities across Alabama.

Working together the Alliance has delivered a blueprint to drive our future efforts in the creation of jobs in eleven business sectors of the state.

The report recommended that we increase the number of prospect-ready sites across Alabama and it called for strengthening our workforce development programs.

All are worthy goals that we will implement this year.

We will also present an aggressive jobs agenda as a top priority in this Legislative Session and that will give our economic recruiters new tools to grow jobs in Alabama.

Our workers must continue to have the training they need to succeed in the jobs of the 21st century. That's why I am proposing new investment in our workforce development and career tech programs.

And we will make sure any rule or regulation that stands in the way of economic development is eliminated. We will free our businesses from unnecessary, bureaucratic road blocks so that they can make better bottom line decisions that create jobs and economic opportunity.

I have been fortunate this year to spend time in communities across our state. A concern I have heard over and over is the need for better roads and bridges to lead to greater economic opportunities and to improve their quality of life for all our citizens.

Trucks, school buses, farm equipment must now be diverted in parts of our rural areas due to bridges that need repair. We have an obligation to preserve the roads we now have and fix our bridges.

We have the ability to finance a major infrastructure program. We will work with local leaders to identify what roads need repair and we will get them fixed as soon as possible. With the use of GARVEE Bonds we can achieve this without raising taxes or taking money from our state savings account. These can be issued as needs are identified.

If we are going to continue to grow jobs in Alabama, we must manage our money wisely. That will require us to make difficult decisions in our state budgets.

We face a major funding shortfall in our General Fund. We have 25% less money to provide basic services.

We know what the federal government would do. They would print more money, borrow against our children's future and drive up our national debt. That won't ever happen in Alabama.

Early this morning at 4:30 there was a single mother who got up and went to work. She works hard everyday at her job serving the people in her community. On April 15th we expect her to send her taxes to Montgomery. And we're expected to be good stewards of that money.

That's exactly what we are going to do. And we are not going to raise her taxes. I promised the people of this state that I would not raise taxes on the people of Alabama, and I am going to keep my word.

I will oppose any effort to raise taxes on Alabama families, and I will veto any tax increase. The people of this state expect us to live within our means, and that's exactly what we're going to do.

Now, that means that we must prioritize the people's money. We must first use that money to support critical state services that have a proven track record.

Passing balanced budgets that protect programs and fully funding critical state services will require the same kind of self-sacrifice and spirit that we saw in the wake of the April tornadoes.

In our General Fund, we will protect the Alabama Department of Public Safety. Nothing is more important than ensuring the safety of our citizens.

Our most vulnerable seniors and children depend on critical services from the Department of Human Resources. I want them to know we will protect them at every turn.

And in the budget I am recommending – we will not cut one penny from the Department of Corrections. Not one single prisoner will be set free due to a lack of funds.

Unfortunately, government always expands to meet the amount of money we have. We must make sure the opposite occurs.

We must reduce the size and scope of government and we have already begun this process.

I will propose legislation that consolidates a number of state agencies.

We will modernize outdated systems within state government by taking advantage of the latest technology to save 100 million dollars over 10 years.

We will streamline our licensing procedures which will produce greater efficiency and significant savings for taxpayers.

And that's just the beginning.

I am committed, together with Lt. Governor Ivey, Speaker Hubbard and Senator Marsh, and our Legislature to making sure we reduce the size of government and make government more efficient. The people of this state deserve this. And the process of cutting, reducing and saving taxpayers money will never stop as long as I'm Governor.

In my education budget, the Alabama Reading Initiative, ACCESS Distance Learning, the Alabama Math Science and Technology Initiative, Advance Placement and our highly successful Pre K programs will all be protected. These are all proven programs that have helped our children achieve better results.

We know that the healthcare of our children is critical to their learning process. That is why I am proposing that we invest more of our education dollars in the well-being of our children. We will make sure children are ready to compete and learn, knowing that they have access to the health care services they need and deserve.

In education, we provide transportation to and from school for our children. If children aren't in school they can't learn. That's why we will protect funds that provide transportation.

We also provide meals to our children who need them - sometimes twice a day. And everyone knows you cannot learn on an empty stomach. In the budget we are presenting, we will ensure no child goes hungry.

We also know a child cannot learn if they are sick. By investing more of our Education dollars in the health of our children, we will make sure that they are healthy and successful.

This year we are proposing an aggressive education agenda. In this global economy, our competitors aren't just Georgia, Tennessee, and Mississippi. They are from all over the world. If we're going to continue to recruit the jobs our people deserve, our workers cannot be just the best in the Southeast, or the best in the country. They have to be the best in the world. And that's why, as a state, we have to constantly be looking for ways to improve how we educate our children.

We must begin by giving our existing public schools more flexibility. I will propose The School Flexibility Act of 2012, which will allow more decision-making at the local level. Working with the Legislative leadership, we will give local school systems the ability to develop their own innovative strategies, free from state or federal bureaucracy.

We must also allow parents a choice in how and where their child receives an education.

Every parent, regardless of how much money they have or where they live, should be given the chance for their child to attend an excellent school. We must give children every opportunity to live up to their full potential. Every child, and every parent, deserves nothing less.

No doubt you've heard a lot recently about Charter Schools, and you will hear a lot more in this Legislative Session. Charter schools are public schools.

The legislation we will propose would create a limited number of public charter schools to give parents a choice.

And we are going pass public charter school legislation in Alabama because our children and parents, and yes, teachers deserve a choice.

It's time for all of us to stop pointing fingers and placing blame for the problems we face in education. It's time we come together and lend a hand to find real solutions, because there is nothing we cannot solve by working together.

Working with State Superintendent Dr. Tommy Bice and his team, we will ensure that every child's classroom and school is led by a highly effective, professional educator free to use their talents to create a stimulating and innovative learning environment in their own classroom.

I know that, many times, our teachers spend hundreds of dollars of their own money on their classrooms. Today, I propose a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for every teacher in this state who spends their money on their classroom.

The most important people in a child's life are the ones who kiss them goodbye in the morning, and the one who spends the day with them in the classroom. We know that, other than their parents, nothing matters more to a child's education than the effectiveness of his or her teacher. We cannot become the world's best public education system

without listening to our teachers and principals. We cannot reform education by ignoring educators.

That's why I will form a "Teacher Cabinet", made up of teachers, administrators, school board members, and parents. These leaders will provide my administration with unfiltered feedback on the needs of our public schools.

I want to hear directly from Muscle Shoals and Monroeville, Fort Payne and Fairhope, Decatur and Dothan, and all places in between, without the filter and spin of Montgomery lobbyists

And as we're talking about our teachers, I want to recognize two of the very best of the profession and the first two members of our Teacher Cabinet.

Dr. Gay Barnes teaches first grade at Horizon Elementary School in Madison. She is Alabama's Teacher of the Year, and a finalist for National Teacher of the Year.

Jeremy Raper teaches Advanced Engineering and Honors Physics at Bob Jones High School. He is one of only 40 teachers in the country to receive the prestigious Milken Educator Award last year.

Both of these teachers represent the best among our educators in Alabama, and are great examples of the teachers we now have leading our students, and the type of teachers we want to continue to have leading in the classroom.

Dr. Barnes, Mr. Raper will you both please stand.

To improve the quality of life for all Alabamians, we have to improve our overall health. In every report detailing the health of our state – the news is not good. Alabama consistently is at the bottom of almost every health ranking including rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and infant mortality.

That is not acceptable.

I know we can do better. In Alabama there are countless organizations, agencies and programs all dedicated to improving the health of our people and we are thankful for their efforts. But it's time we start producing real results that improve the lives of our people.

I will create a Health Alliance bringing all of these entities together at one table. Each one will have a clear mission and we will set goals for our state to reach.

When we all work together to improve the lives of Alabamians, we produce real results. We saw how well this works with the Tornado Recovery Action Council, where a group of private citizens came together, listened to the people and produced twenty, common sense recommendations to better prepare our state for future disasters.

We're facing some adversity right now. It's a time that demands courageous leadership, and sacrifice. Those of us who serve in government learned during the spring of 2011 that there is no difficulty that the people of Alabama cannot overcome when we work together and put aside personal agendas for the greater good.

That is what we saw in the wave of generosity that swept across our state in the aftermath of April 27th. Volunteers came from far and wide to help from Franklin to DeKalb County, Calhoun to Winston County. Generous and caring groups from Auburn came to the aid of those in Tuscaloosa. That's just the kind of spirit we need in our state to help solve all our problems.

We also see it in Carson Tinker. By now you may have heard Carson's story. One of the 62 tornadoes that tore across Alabama last spring ripped Carson's house, and his life apart.

Carson was injured after being thrown 100 yards. He lost his home. And more importantly, like so many people across this state he lost someone he dearly loved.

What you may not realize is that Carson has the most thankless job in football. He snaps the ball on punts and field goals. He's a Long snapper. No one will notice if he's perfect. They'll only notice if he's made a mistake.

Despite his injuries, despite his personal tragedies, Carson didn't make a single bad snap in his career. He did his job to perfection, and he helped his team achieve the ultimate goal.

Carson, would you please stand?

In these tough times, let's follow the example of people like Carson Tinker. Let's pull together in the face of adversity, do our jobs to the best of our ability, and let's serve the people who sent us here.

Last year the people of Alabama showed all of us how it should be done. They came together, worked hard, were unselfish and it didn't matter who got credit.

The people didn't elect us to be caretakers of state government. We are not here to protect the status quo.

We need to do everything we can to give people the opportunity to make their lives better, whether it's in helping them get a good job, a good education or just being healthier. By working together we can make that happen.

When we leave our time in office, we want to leave Alabama a better place than when we arrived. That should be our purpose – and it should be the vision of everyone in this room.

God bless you. And may God bless the Great State of Alabama.