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to*

# GOVERNMENT & INDUSTRY





# Update: a report about action

Most dictionaries provide two definitions for the word “update,” one for when it’s used as a noun and another for when it’s used as a verb.

“Update” the noun refers to a report that includes the most recent information about something. “Update” the verb refers to the action of improving something or making it more modern.

Both definitions are relevant to the publication you’re now reading, The Daily Home’s annual Update edition. It contains information about recent accomplishments made by local government officials and leaders in industry, civics and commerce, as well as the challenges they’re facing. It explains what they have done to improve their respective communities.

In effect, this special publication updates the stories of Talladega and St. Clair counties by taking a look back at the accomplishments and significant events of 2015 while considering the state of local governments, schools, health care and business at the start of 2016 and looking ahead at what is expected to be accomplished during the coming months.

We’ve grouped these stories into four sections.

**Government & Industry** examines the state of local municipal and county governments, also taking a look at how things stand as far as economic and industrial development is concerned. Members of the Talladega and St. Clair legislative delegations have talked with our reporters to outline what’s expected to happen in Montgomery during 2016.

In **Health & Education**, we offer a glimpse into the state of local schools and health care providers at the start of the new year while recounting some of last year’s accomplishments.

**Friends & Neighbors** will introduce you or reacquaint you with some familiar faces in local communities, celebrating what they do for the benefit of others.

In the three **Commerce** sections, we’ll visit some long-standing local businesses that are mainstays in Talladega, Munford, Lincoln, Sylacauga, Childersburg, Oak Grove and Pell City.

As you read these stories, it is our hope that you’ll be reminded of some reasons you enjoy calling this area your home. It is our further hope that you will support the advertisers who have enabled us to bring these stories to you. We are grateful to them for this opportunity, and we are grateful to you as readers, both on a daily basis and on special occasions such as this Update.



**Buddy Roberts**



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home/file

**Members of the Talladega County Commission are, from left, Greg Atkinson, Malley Limbaugh, Kelvin Cunningham, Tony Haynes and Jackie Swinford.**

## New year to bring improvements, growth

**By LACI BRASWELL**  
Home staff writer

The members of the Talladega County Commission said they all believe that the new year will bring improvements and economic growth to the county.

“I would say we are in a very good place, we communicate with each other well and can get things done,” Commissioner Greg Atkinson said.

Commission Chairman Kelvin Cunningham said he is proud of how the commission has handled its finances.

“We have a balanced budget and have for several years now. With the economy in the state it’s in, it’s quite an accomplishment,” Cunningham said.

2015 was a productive year for the commissioners and county staff.

“Along with balancing the budget, we brought a lot of new businesses to the county this year, which will benefit the entire county,” Commissioner Malley Limbaugh said.

“I am extremely proud of our CMP marksmanship park. It’s one of the best in the nation,” Commissioner Tony Haynes said.

According to the park’s website, “The new CMP Talladega Marksmanship Park is one of the most advanced outdoor facilities in the world – unlike any other. Boasting the latest technological advances in the realm of marksmanship, it is a must-see destination for firearm enthusiasts across the country. The park will be open to the public, year-round, offering many opportunities to marksmen of all ages.”

The 500-acre facility is two miles from the Talladega Superspeedway.

The park features entail a 600-yard rifle range with targets at 200, 300 and 600 yards, a 100-yard multi-purpose range and a 50-yard pistol range. CMP Talladega Marksmanship park is also home to 15 action pistol bays and a trap field, 5-stand field and a 15-station sporting clays field, which all include automated trap machines.

“If you haven’t visited the facility yet, you are missing out,” Haynes said.

In 2016, the commissioners hope to continue their success with new projects that are still in the works.

The commissioners agreed they hope to bring economic growth and job opportunities with new businesses that are in the works for the county.

“Improving our roads is something that also needs to be done,” Commissioner Jackie Swinford said.

Atkinson said he hopes to solve the feral dog problem in the Sylacauga mill village community.

“It’s been an ongoing problem and it will take time to fix it, but something needs to be done,” he said.

Residents of the mill village say the number of stray dogs has reached the hundreds.

“The amount of feral dogs in the village has become overwhelming due to no leash laws set in place or proper funding for the animal shelters in the area,” Atkinson said.

Cunningham also mentioned the water department as an area of concern.

“The treatment plant we have with Shelby County needs attention,” he said.

In addition to new businesses and road improvements, the Choccolocco Creek Bridge on Highway 207 will be completely repaired.

“The state is currently working on a redesign that should be completed in the near future,” Cunningham said.

The commission also expects 2016 will be a good year for the city of Childersburg. Recently Childersburg residents approved a property mill tax increase of 2 percent, setting the updated property tax there at 5 mills.

Proposed projects for revenue from

the tax increase include building a new football stadium at Childersburg High School, improving the baseball and softball fields, renovating the gym at Childersburg Elementary School and also renovating the Warwood Elementary School cafeteria.

Although the county has several new improvement projects in the works, according to the commissioners, money will always be an issue.

“Funding is always a problem, even with a balanced budget,” Cunningham said.

The commissioners said they hope to tackle the funding issues by providing more creative ways for community outreach.

“We hope to get more creative and conservative with our spending,” Cunningham said.

“The commission wants to do more for the communities in Talladega County and its outreach programs. We want to hear from you, because our job is to serve our county,” Atkinson said.

### Update 2016

This edition is the result of the cooperative and combined efforts of The Daily Home staff.

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# Talladega: Looking back, looking ahead

By **CHRIS NORWOOD**  
Home staff writer

The city of Talladega launched or completed more than a dozen major projects in the past year and has even more to come during 2016.

In the past year, according to city manager Patrick Bryant, the city “completed work on the Frazier Farms drainage project, which included multiple improvements to the drainage system, (including) new, upsized driveway pipes, the cleaning and widening of existing ditches and expansions to the drainage system outfall structure.”

Work continued on several other drainage projects as well, including improvements to the drainage system at Veterans Park and design work on detention systems on Avenue H and Haynes Street. The city also accepted a \$46,500 Land and Water Conservation Fund grant for new restrooms at Veterans Park, bought a new fire truck for \$380,825, eight new police cars for \$194,000 and accepted a \$15,000 grant from the Alabama Historic Preservation Commission to catalog the city’s numerous historic buildings.

The city also accepted a grant for \$65,000 through the East Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission to continue its Senior Nutrition Program, which feeds an estimated 85 seniors per day, Bryant said. The council voted to approve a contract with the Red Cross to use the B.N. Mabra Center and Spring Street Recreation Center as shelters in the event of a disaster.

The 2015 paving project involved work on 21 streets in every part of the city, as well as construction of a new public parking lot and an asphalt lot for the recycling center. A Safe Routes to Schools project covered major improvements in the South Street area, and design work and property acquisition continued on bridge replacement projects on Isbell

Circle, Coosa Street, West Street and Brignoli Street.

There was a great deal of work done on the city’s water and sewer infrastructure as well, including “installation of new Acqua Disk filters, a Vaughn digester mixing pump, and new Flyght Intermediate pumps at the main wastewater plant. (We) also installed new lime feeder equipment and reworked valves and controls of Filters 5 through 8 at the water filter plant.” Some 8.5 miles of sewer were cleaned and inspected, and 1.7 miles of sewer were rehabilitated and replaced. Some 45 manholes were reconditioned, Bryant said.

The city also “performed a leak detection program on 50 plus miles of water main, improved the Mount Olive water system by installing a primary water feed and booster station to the water tank, completed rehabilitation of the Harmon Park well (including treatment equipment) (and) approved a contract for the Shocco Sewer lift station.” Work on this last project got under way in 2015 and is scheduled for completion this year.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture-funded summer food program will continue this year, as it has for more than a quarter of a century, and will provide meals for an estimated 700 school-aged participants per day.

Another USDA grant, for \$99,000, goes toward the renovation of a building on the historic courthouse square, which will be a house a coffee house to be called The Square Cup. The city’s capital improvement funds provide the grant match for this project, which is part of the ongoing downtown revitalization plan. The city has another space available on the square that it intends to fill this year, Bryant said.

Work began on the development of a recycling drop-off location as well.

Lastly, the city contracted with an outside firm to perform



Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

**Members of the Talladega City Council are, from left, Horace Patterson, Jarvis Elston, David Street, Mayor Jerry Cooper, Ricky Simpson and Gerald Cooper.**

a rebranding for the city. Public meetings and input are currently underway, with the process expected to be complete in the coming year.

2016 will be an even more productive year, based on the list of projects recently approved for the first quarter. It should be noted that this project list does not include major capital improvements, which will be determined during a council work session that had not been scheduled as this article was written in late January.

In the coming year, there are plans to digitize audio and web broadcasts of council meetings, online codification of city ordinances and online posting of council agendas and minutes, according to the recently approved plan. Bryant also pointed out that the city has recently applied for a major grant to bring the square into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and to provide new landscaping.

Another major landscaping project is on tap for the Davey Allison Park behind city hall. This is not a city park, so the funding for the project will not be coming from the city, but the Community Appearance Department will be overseeing the work.

The fire department will be working with insurance companies and expanding inspection authority, putting in a new training facility at the rescue squad building and purchasing new self-contained breathing apparatus equipment. Municipal court procedures are due to be streamlined, including credit card payment and an amnesty month, and drainage and resurfacing work are scheduled for the Ben Bruner Sports Complex and Edythe Sims Park, and there will be new lighting at the Spring Street recreation center.

The police department will be upgrading its social media presence, expanding the neighborhood watch and Operation

PULL programs and designing an anti-bullying campaign, according to the plan.

The bridge replacement and water detention projects listed above will continue, along with fencing and lighting for the recycling center and work at Veterans Park and the Square Cup. These projects are all listed for completion in the next 90 days or less.

More downtown revitalization projects will enter the planning phase, and a renovation project at city hall is expected to streamline operations there by bringing related services closer together and moving the human resources department up from the old Water Board building on the Square.

A database of existing mobile homes in the city will go online, and a new safety manual for city employees will be developed, Bryant told the council.

More water and sewer inspection, renovation and replacement are also on tap for the first quarter.

## Lincoln continues upward trend of new businesses

By **ELSIE HODNETT**  
Home staff writer

Lincoln Mayor Bud Kitchin said he feels in 2016 the city will continue the unprecedented growth and healthy economy experienced over the last 15 years.

“New housing starts are up and building and construction permits are expected to increase 16 percent in FY16,” he said. “New business license applications for businesses located within the city limits continue to grow at above average pace.”

Kitchin said Lincoln continues to enjoy a strong upward trend in new and expanding business.

“The city leadership looks to focus its efforts on infrastructure improvements in 2016 including commercial development, utility and road improvements.

Kitchin said 2015 brought many announcements and accomplishments to the city.

“T/A Petro announced a \$10 million renovation of the former Race City Travel Plaza to include a new Popeye’s and diesel repair center along with a complete renovation of the Minit Mart,” he said. “There was the relaunch of \$13 million construction of Speedway LLC Travel Center, Piggly Wiggly purchased Lincoln Super Foods and opened Jan. 11, 2016, Magnolias Restaurant opened to rave reviews, Legacy Cabinets expanded again announcing 140 new jobs and a new investment of \$5.7 million, and a \$3.7 million ATRIP roads improvement project began on Alabama 77 north of Interstate 20 with installation of new traffic signals at the interstate ramps, center turn lane, widening of the west-bound exit ramp and extension of Magnolia east of Alabama 77.”

Kitchin said other accomplishments in 2015 include the launch of the First Annual Blue Eye Creek Festival, announced the Lock 4 paving project, was awarded a grant for sidewalks connecting Lincoln Public Library with Moseley Park, let the contract to remove and install new sidewalks and trees on Magnolia Street, opened Fire Station No. 5 at Handy Corner to serve the southern area of the city, expanded the Neighborhood Watch Program to focus on city neighborhood parks and many other things.

Accomplishments on the agenda this year included the opening of the new Piggly Wiggly and Speedway Travel Center in January. The city announced widening and improvements for Magnolia Street, renovation of the I-20/Alabama 77 interstate lighting, street pavement assessment initiated for residential and connector streets, a sewer main extension from Bishop Truss Road to U.S. 78 and construction of a new 100,000 square-foot spec building in the Lincoln Industrial Park.

Future projects on the horizon include parking lot lighting at the library and final landscaping, future phase work for Moseley Park as per the approved master plan, renovation of the police department building and demolition of the old library.

“I don’t see any unsurmountable challenges in our way as long as the economy continues to improve as it has in the last 18 months,” he said. “Cities either grow and evolve or your community stagnates and businesses look elsewhere to expand. Lincoln is a very progressive city while maintaining its village feel. We will overcome any challenges with hard work and teamwork.”

“I don’t see any unsurmountable challenges in our way as long as the economy continues to improve as it has in the last 18 months.”



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File photo



# Pell City continues to move forward

By **DAVID ATCHISON**  
Home staff writer

Pell City officials continue to work towards improving the quality of life and services for its residence, and will focus on the completion of three major projects to help move the city forward to that goal.

City Manager Brian Muenger said the city will focus on completing the Municipal Complex, which will house the new public library, the Pell City Chamber of Commerce, the new splash pad in Lakeside Park and renovation work to the Pell City Civic Center.

"In many cases, these projects have been desired by the public for years, or even decades, and it is an honor to finally see these projects to completion," Muenger said.

He said the Municipal Complex renovation, which began in July 2015, is expected to be completed by spring.

Muenger said the renovation of the 56,000-square-foot facility is on schedule, and will eventually house the Pell City Library and Chamber of Commerce on the ground floor.

"The library has long outgrown its existing facility adjacent to City Hall, and the City Council, Library Board, and Library Guild have all stalwartly supported the expansion of this important public facility," Muenger said.

He said the new library will provide ample space for library patrons for years to come.

Muenger said the Municipal complex will also provide a permanent home for the Pell City Chamber of Commerce, as well as provide six public meeting rooms, the largest of which can accommodate 200 people.

The second ongoing capital project, the Splash Pad, is also nearing completion.

"Nearly all site work has been completed on this project, and the contractor is in the process of completing the framing of the building," Muenger said.

He said the facility is tentatively slated to open in April or May and can accommodate in excess of 100 people simultaneously.

Muenger said the new splash pad will provide quality entertainment for community youth.

"Multiple pavilions are slated to be constructed around the Splash Pad, and the facility will be available for group bookings," he said. "During the visioning session con-

ducted by the City Council one of the primary desires expressed by the citizenry was to expand the recreational offerings available within the city, and the Splash Pad will help to satisfy the recreational needs of our growing community, as well as serve as an attraction for those visiting our area."

"The final capital project of the year is the renovation of the Civic Center, which I anticipate will begin in late Spring or early summer of 2016," Muenger said. "The council has allocated approximately \$700,000 for the renovation of this facility, desiring to modernize the building and adjacent areas."

He said some of the items that may be addressed during this renovation are the inadequate restroom facilities, the addition of a catering kitchen, improvements to the physical fitness areas, and the replacement of the tennis building.

"Another important area of focus is the access points to the facility, which are currently being studied by an engineering firm that will propose ways to improve the traffic flow into and out of the Civic Center, Sports Complex, and Lakeside Park," Muenger said.

"The popularity of these recreation areas, compounded with increasing traffic on Highway 34 often make access to these locations difficult, and this is something that we believe can be significantly improved by modifying the existing access points and parking areas."

He said the city is in the implementation phase of several grant projects that are likely to be completed in 2016. These include the 19th Street Sidewalk project, which will link the Glenn City area to the newly renovated Armory and 19th Street Rec Hall, improving accessibility and pedestrian safety.

"Plans for this project are currently undergoing final review by ALDOT," Muenger said.

He said the city has also been awarded a Transportations Alternative Program grant that will allow for further improvements to the downtown streetscape, expanding on existing improvements along Highway 78.

"The active pursuit of outside funding is an important part of the city's development, and the city will continue to aggressively pursue external funding sources to leverage its available funds," Muenger said.

He said the cleanup and develop-

ment of the former Avondale Mills property is one of the highest priority goals of the City Council for the upcoming years.

"The finalization of the master plan for the site is expected to continue during the first quarter of the year, as is the continuation of the salvage efforts on the site," Muenger said. "With the completion of this planning and cleanup effort, the city will be able to initiate grading and landscape work on the site, as well as begin the process of implementing the desired improvements, such as a walking track, farmers market, and eventually an amphitheater."

He said there are several available sources of outside funding that the city will pursue to assist in this development, including grant programs for recreational trails.

Muenger said industrial and commercial recruitment remains a top priority of the city.

"Through our partnership with the St. Clair County EDC, the city continues to aggressively recruit industry expansion, both in the form of new industry and the expansion of existing industry," Muenger said.

He said the city's new Cogswell Industrial Park property deserves attention in the coming year.

He said the property has the potential to accommodate multiple industries but will require site preparation and grading to realize its full potential to the city.

"A funding proposal for this work is being developed, and the City Council will have the opportunity to review it in the coming months," Muenger said. The continued growth of our base of employment is an integral part of supporting our existing populace, as well as attracting new citizens to our area."

Muenger said according to the 2010 the Census Bureau, Pell City has seen a population increase of nearly 7 percent and a population growth of more than 40 percent since the 2000 census.

He said the city's projects reflect the city's commitment to increasing its quality of life and services to meet the evolving needs of our community.

"To this end, the city will endeavor to update its comprehensive plan in the coming year," Muenger said. "This process will be an inclusive effort between planning experts, the public, and city officials, working together to develop the vision for the future of our community. The current comprehensive plan, zoning, and other associated regulations must be updated to reflect the changes in our community and to ensure that the city is positioned optimally for future growth."



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

**The new Municipal Complex will house the new public library and the Pell City Chamber of Commerce. The facility will also provide ample space for meetings.**



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

**The new Splash Pad in Pell City's Lakeside Park is expected to open in April or May.**

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**By DENISE SINCLAIR**  
Home staff writer

“Many small but significant steps have been taken to insure the safety and welfare of our citizens,” Rich said.

On plans for 2016, the mayor said



From left are Childersburg City Council members Ralph Rich, Billy Lester, Michele Whisman, Angesa Twymon, Robert Cleckler and Mayor James Payne.

Payne and Rich mentioned working on next year's budget to perhaps give city employees another raise. Both agreed the council and mayor may not always agree on issues, but they work

The councilman wants to see more

Payne said he wants residents to come to him if they have questions. "I will sit down and go over anything with them. I want everyone to know everything I do. I want to be upfront," the mayor said.

How to contact the mayor and council

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# State of Sylacauga city government

By DENISE SINCLAIR  
Home staff writer

**SYLACAUGA** -- The mayor and the majority of city council members believe the Marble City has started off 2016 on a strong note.

Mayor Doug Murphree said the city is able to provide services to its citizens that they expect and deserve. "While our revenue stream is not increasing as rapidly as it was prior to 2008 we see a slight increase each year. Although we are not able to do all the things we need

to do we seem to be holding our own as far as our basic needs are concerned," he said.

Council President Rocky Lucas said he believes the city has started off strong, but there is always room for improvement. He said revenues appear to be creeping up, and that is a good indicator.

"It shows improvement in the economy and is a direct reflection of our business owners' resilience to stand-fast even in the worst of times. That is something that definitely deserves recognition. Over \$6 million of \$13 million yearly budget is generated from sales tax and without people willing to open businesses in our city, that simply would not be the case. The business community is the backbone of our city. Also, the employees of the city deserve recognition. From the city clerk's offices collecting business licenses to the various other departments staying within their budget and keeping excess spending to a minimum," Lucas said.

Councilman Billy Carden doesn't see the city starting off the year on a positive note. In fact, he said he would describe the state of the city as "very poor. We haven't gotten anything done."

Councilman Joe Hogan said after three plus years of overcoming obstacles, the city is poised to see some great advancements and much needed progression over the next four years.

Councilman Tom Roberts said he has seen "a lot of positives" in the business community with a handful of new businesses now open in the downtown area and several more new businesses in the works that should open this year.

"We've had several established businesses have complete makeovers - Arby's and Huddle House, and a new MainStreet Urgent Family Care coming in February to Highway 280. Another positive, the relocation of the Sylacauga City Schools Central Office to downtown has already paid dividends in increased every day traffic in the downtown shopping district," Roberts said.

Councilman Shannon Darby believes the city is on the move. "Our downtown is improving and growing. We have a

new coffee shop, the board of education and a few more businesses, which will attract travelers to visit our downtown and shop. Also on Highway 280, we have the MainStreet Urgent Family Center coming and Little Caesars relocating at a main intersection. All will play a major part in growth. We are always working to bring new business and industry to the city."

On what was accomplished in Sylacauga in 2015, Murphree said Heritage Plastics and Atlas Roofing expanded their operations in the city while New Technologies Fertilizer started operations.

One long-time issue in the city got resolved, Murphree said. "We secured a grant from the state to demolish the old East Highland school building. This project should be completed within the next 90 days. Also, we hired an engineering firm to complete a paving evaluation which allows us to prioritize our streets to be paved. We also did a study on a proposed sports complex on Highway 280 and the site where our existing sports complex is located," he said.

Carden said he saw very few accomplishment for the city in 2015 and expects even fewer in 2016.

"We needed streets paved, we needed a solution for the animal shelter and our street lights need repairing. We did very little in 2015 and until we get more funding to work with, we are not going to be able to do anything in 2016," Carden said. "Nothing is going to change. We've got to get some additional taxes, and I know people don't want to hear that. But we need revenue to do projects in this city."

Lucas said there are two accomplishments that really stand out for him in 2015. "Both were voted on by the citizens of Sylacauga. The first is the extension of the ad valorem tax for

our board of education. The extension has allowed the board to accomplish many capital improvements necessary to ensure our school system is one of the best in the state.

"The second accomplishment that stands out is Sunday alcohol sales. As I have said in the past Sunday alcohol sales is so much bigger than being able to purchase alcohol on Sunday. It is a tool that is being used for economic development, in turn increasing the revenue stream in Sylacauga," Lucas said.

Hogan pointed out the city started getting its strategic and comprehensive plan updated, which he said is vital to the city's long term progress.

"We have worked hard on building a new multi-use complex and have never been closer. We have used tax incentive opportunities to bring in several new businesses. We have an official road evaluation now and can start putting a financial plan together for a paving project. We were able to have an election

that allowed for Sunday alcohol sales. This will create and help us in bringing in some new restaurants. We initiated and finished projects related to city hall and Sylacauga High School. We have worked hard to develop some 280 property and we are looking at a fourth version of a shopping center contract which could include restaurants, entertainment and small amphitheater. We have approved improvements to some of our street corners, light poles, and traffic lights," Hogan said.

Roberts said he was more than a bit disappointed in what city government accomplished in 2015. "I felt like we had a number of opportunities to make lasting and positive differences in several areas of concern," he said.

Roberts said hopefully with it being

"Our downtown is improving and growing. We have a new coffee shop, the board of education and a few more businesses, which will attract travelers to visit our downtown and shop."

See Sylacauga, Page 8A



Mayor  
Doug  
Murphree



Rocky Lucas



Billy Carden



Shannon  
Darby



Tom Roberts



Joe Hogan

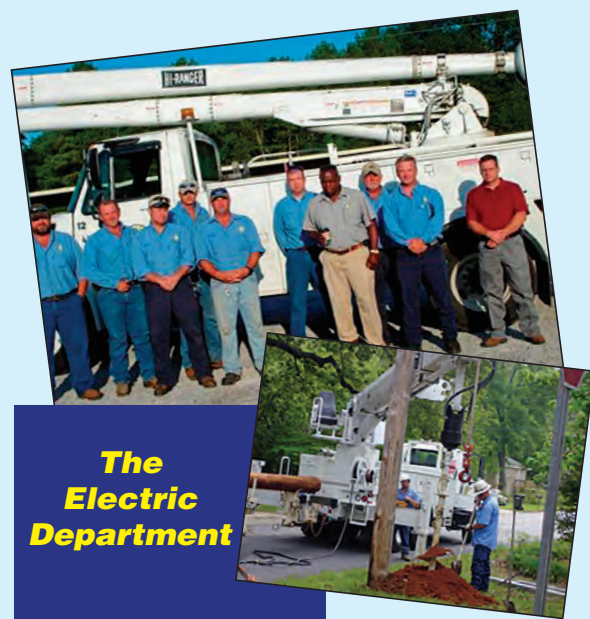


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# Sylacauga

From Page 6A

an election year, “we will feel the urgency necessary to act on a number of important matters. On a more positive note, our local school system, following the guide of their excellent strategic plan, is continuing to pay dividends in the form of modern facilities and improvements in the quality of education we are offering our young citizens. It’s exciting to watch what is happening.”

Darby said the city’s school system in 2015 has gone above and beyond to give Sylacauga’s youth the tools they need to compete with other cities. “With the right essentials, our students will be educated with excellence, therefore they will always give their best,” Darby said.

He also said the administration had also evaluated its streets for paving and hired more police officers and firefighters, which will keep citizens safer and allow the city to operate effectively.

Murphree, when looking forward into 2016, said the city has started the process to update its comprehensive and strategic plans.

“Working with East Alabama Planning Commission and a number of our citizens, we hope to plan for the growth of Sylacauga for the next several years. A paving project is a must for 2016,” Murphree said. “We should be able to begin the process of making a sports facility a reality. A new road from Alabama 21 to our existing sports fields and connect to Highway 511 could possibly begin. Through the TAP grant we received, we will make lighting and sidewalk improvements to Broadway in front of city hall.”

Lucas said he doesn’t promise anything for the coming year, because he is only one voting member of the council. “There must be a majority vote to accomplish anything. There are several things I would hope the council come come to an agreement on and get done for the city.”

Hogan wants to see everything the council started working on in 2015 completed in 2016. “The last council left us with a huge budget deficit in our first year that took us two years to overcome. That challenge had to be overcome just to get us to where we are now,” he said.

The councilman said the city is in a good position to see improvements. “We have goals, evaluations, cost projections, and drawings in place for several things to help improve the quality of life, but we do face a huge obstacle -- money,” Hogan said.

Roberts said the city has started updating its comprehensive and strategic plans. “If we do more to engage the community in the process and do more than simply go through the motions, it can pay huge dividends in so many ways. It is so much easier to succeed when you have concrete plans to guide the process, especially when the citizens actually buy into those plans because they helped develop them and start the process of putting them into action.”

The city school system will continue improving in 2016, Darby predicted. The city will also pave streets and has not ruled out a sports complex with more planning, he added. “This is a great project and others will continue to be on the horizon.”

For the future, Murphree said over the next two to three years he would like to see the city complete a sizeable paving project, complete a first class multi-use sports facility, complete an indoor aquatic center and complete a connector road from Alabama 21 to Highway 511.

Lucas said there are many things he would like to see done down the road.

“The demolition of East Highland School has been a work in progress for some time and will soon be completed. Also, the Streetscape project which was started some time back and completed from First to Third Street will be extended to Fourth Street. This will improve the aesthetics of the block on which the municipal complex and the ever-growing B.B. Comer Memorial Library sit. The things I would like to see started in 2016 from a bricks and mortar perspective are a street paving project, a recreation facility and increased retail development. Street paving is something that has to be done. A recreation facility has been a hot topic of conversation for a long time in Sylacauga, nearly two decades. We are closer to making what some have called a dream, a reality,” he said.

Lucas added, “I think it is important that we keep pushing forward with this target in mind. Sometimes I believe our priorities are in the wrong order when it comes to a recreation facility. Many have stated, ‘think how much revenue would be generated by people coming from out of town to our complex.’ While this may be true, it is my belief we should build a facility which best fits the needs of the citizens of Sylacauga both young and old. Next, retail development. As I mentioned earlier, nearly half of our budget is generated by sales tax. Without sales tax, the city will falter. We have prime property on 280 which is an attraction for developers. The issue we have encountered is, these developers ask the city to take all the risks associated with development, something I personally am not in favor of. The city has an outstanding commercial development authority that does a great job with our downtown area. We have been funding the CDA since we took office,” Lucas said.

The biggest challenge Carden sees for the city must overcome is funding. “If you don’t have it, you can’t spend it. There is just no way to do anything without money,” he said.

Hogan said the city has to find more revenue when looking to the future. “Our revenues do not increase at the rate of our expenses. Even with cost cutting measures in place, we still cannot keep up. We have to be creative with our investments and think outside the box as to how we can generate more revenue. We learn many ways, and get new ideas, at the conferences we go to. Other cities, and their accomplishments are a huge resource. We have to continue to get all the resources we can, take what they are doing and do it here,” he said.

Roberts said there are a handful of major projects on the drawing board for the city that can contribute to the local economy in the form of new jobs for local citizens.

He said, “It will also enhance our quality of life through new and better shopping, dining and entertainment opportunities.”

In facing the future, Murphree said the city’s biggest and most obvious challenge in making these projects become reality is funding.

“With our present funding stream it will be difficult to make our list of wishes come true,” the mayor



File photo

**More than \$6 million of the city’s \$13 million budget is generated from sales taxes, and “without people willing to open businesses in our city, that simply would not be the case,” according to Sylacauga officials. “The business community is the backbone of our city.”**



File photo

**The city school system is expected to continue improving in 2016. The city will also pave streets and has not ruled out building a sports complex.**

said. “The challenge is looking at ways to increase city revenues.”

Lucas agreed with the mayor saying the city’s largest hurdle with any of the projects mentioned is revenue.

“Sylacauga has managed to maintain a very good credit rating and should have no problem borrowing capital. However, as things stand right now, the city doesn’t have the revenue to pay the debt back,” Lucas said.

The councilman said such challenges will be tough to overcome but not impossible.

“With 2016 being an election year, we must stay the course and not make decisions based on whether or not we will be re-elected. The decisions made this year as with any year must be what is best for Sylacauga,” Lucas said.

Roberts said while the proposed projects he spoke of are technically outside the control of local government and community, some things will help enhance the value of Sylacauga. “We have to be ready to take advantage of opportunities when they arrive. That includes making our community more attractive to investment in the forms of industry, tourism, business and new housing to help rebuild the community of mid-management to executive and professional personnel that actually live in Sylacauga. That aspect of the community once drove our community to greatness, and we need to rebuild it now more than ever,” he said.

To do this, he said community involvement in planning and implementation is necessary for growth. “We must identify and enhance our assets while we address our shortcomings. Such a combination can and will pay dividends in creating and taking advantage of opportunities for progress,” Roberts said.

Darby believes the city can overcome its challenges, if there are any, with strategic planning. “We can overcome any obstacle. We can always seek more ways to generate revenue by recruiting industry and not increasing taxes. We can also seek more grant monies,” he said.

How to contact the mayor and council members

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**Council President Rocky Lucas**, 256-249-8792  
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**Councilman Joe Hogan**, 256-369-1194,  
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# St. Clair county shows growth each decade

By **GARY HANNER**  
Home staff writer

Over the past four decades, St. Clair County has seen population growth reach 32 percent – each decade.

In the 1970s, there were almost 28,000 people living in the county. According to the latest census, there were 86,697 people living in St. Clair County as of 2014.

While St. Clair County is seeing a rapid growth percentage, statewide is only at nine percent growth each decade.

Leading the county in the right direction through the years is the St. Clair County Commission.

According to Commission Chairman Paul Manning, St. Clair County began 2016 strongly and aggressively. He said budgetary revenues projected are coming in as expected and their current projects are on schedule for completion.

“This commission has set a goal to prepare our county for economic growth, and there are two factors that are important to us,” Manning said. “First, we want our county infrastructure to be better than the average. With the hard winter conditions of the past two years, many of our county roads have suffered damage due to the harsh conditions. In order to continue to bring economic growth to this county, we feel it is important to improve the county roads that run through our county and cities. Our citizens deserve good roads to travel. We are committed to that.”

Manning also said debt on prior road projects will be paid in full in three and a half years.

“This commission has pledged a pay-as-you go approach to maintain county roads, keeping the county from additional debt,” Manning said. “This commission is excited about the debt free approach and maintaining safer roads for the citizens of St. Clair County.”

Manning said the commission has set a goal to provide jobs for St. Clair County citizens.

“Working with the St. Clair County Economic Development Council, job fairs have been and will continue to be held for our residents,” Manning said. “Three job fairs have already been offered; two on the I-20 Corridor, and one on the I-59 Corridor. Jobs are offered on the spot, further lowering the already low unemployment rate in the county.”

Manning said the St. Clair County EDC is working with existing business/industries to expand, creating more jobs, and new projects are also in the works.

“There were over 200 new manufacturing jobs announced in 2015,” Manning said. “These new job announcements, combined with the growth in the healthcare and retail sector, led to over 500 job openings reported by our local employers. Because of the large number of job openings, the county commission felt it was important to partner with the city of Ashville, the EDC, Jefferson State Community College,

local employers, and all the chambers of commerce along the I-20 corridor to host two separate career expos. Almost 500 job seekers attended these two successful events. This commission always works hard to form partnerships that lead to opportunities for all our citizens to be employed.”

Manning said in 2015, the most reported problems from citizens were about the conditions of roads. To address this problem, Manning said ATRIP (Alabama Transportation Rehabilitation and Improvement Program) projects were being completed and continued into 2016.

“During 2015, the commission, county engineer, department heads, press and others took a bus tour to evaluate the repairs needed to roads,” Manning said. “We saw firsthand a new micro-surfacing treatment being used to make road repairs. As a result, many county roads were placed on a priority list for resurfacing. That project started in 2015 and continues using local funds from the county fuel tax.”

Other accomplishments Manning noted that took place in 2015 included:

- The St. Clair County Commission hired its own IT (Information Technology) staff to address technology issues and help assist every agency in the county. Manning said this has proven to be a time saving, money saving step.
- “A project that is bringing much satisfaction to our citizens is the Animal Shelter partnership with the City of Pell City for the maintenance, care and safety of animals without additional cost to the county budget,” Manning said. The shelter serves a majority of the county.
- The Coosa Valley Water Supply District has experienced success with a decrease in the cost of water to the partner cities.
- The commission stands ready to assist cities with their projects. A partnership with Moody to bring retail to the county was completed with the opening of Publix in December.

“St. Clair County is one of the fastest growing counties in the state,” Manning said. “We are proud of this continuous growth and are prepared to meet the challenges it brings. Of special note is the service provided through our law enforcement agencies in this county. Providing a safe county and safe cities have been main focuses and they will continue to be.”

As 2016 enters its second month, the commission looks forward to working with all municipalities to bring services that are beneficial to all residents, such as:

- Funding for road improvements from the state through ATRIP will be completed for the major connecting roads.
- The administration building renovations in Ashville will also be completed, providing more space and efficient service for the county commission, revenue office, IT department, and probate court/offices;
- Continued support of our Schools, EDC, municipalities, and county agencies will be evidenced as the economy continues to grow. Manning said the commission

“One of the main focuses for 2016 will be to provide skilled workers for our businesses and industries.”

## Balanced budget No. 1 responsibility

By **GARY HANNER**  
Home staff writer

Senator Jim McClendon retired from his private practice upon beginning his first term in the Alabama Legislature in 2002. Senator McClendon served three terms in the House of Representatives and now serves Senate District 11, which includes St. Clair, Talladega and Shelby counties.

When asked to describe the state of Alabama government at the start of 2016, McClendon said based on information discussed in state budget hearings last month, state agencies are providing the essential services.

“We are doing okay,” McClendon said. “Finances are still uppermost in our minds.”

McClendon said he believes it will be a struggle financially as lawmakers prepare next year’s budget.

“We are currently holding our own without raising widespread taxes,” he said.

When asked what McClendon thought about the major issues the legislature will deal with this session, he said it will definitely be balancing the budget.

“Our number one responsibility is having a balanced budget,” he said. “We’ve just held hearings on needs.”

McClendon gave examples of what some agencies are asking for.

- Medicaid administrators have requested for \$157 million more than

the level at which the program was funded last year.

- Prisons have asked for an additional \$18 million.
- The Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (ALEA) has asked for an additional \$23 million.

“I would be surprised if they get what they ask for,” McClendon said. “I have a meeting with the Department of Transportation, and they are seeking an additional tax on gasoline somewhere around 10-12 cents per gallon. I think the legislature will have a very difficult time raising any type of taxes. I have heard from several of my constituents who are opposed to the gas tax. I do know that St. Clair County recently had an increase of 4 cents on a gallon.”

When asked if he had plans to introduce any local legislation, McClendon said he had not, as of late January, had any of the county commissioners or any mayors throughout his district request that any local bills be proposed.

A local measure McClendon proposed last year was to allow municipalities in St. Clair County to have a referendum to have the opportunity to vote on Sunday alcohol sales.

Municipalities that voted in favor of Sunday alcohol sales in 2015 included Pell City, Riverside,

Moody and Springville. More municipalities may vote on Sunday alcohol in 2016, the senator said.

“The main thing we accomplished in 2015 was creating a balanced budget, and avoiding a widespread tax increase,” McClendon said.

The senator is sponsoring a Senate bill proposing a constitutional amendment implementing a state lottery “on behalf and for the benefit of the state,” if approved by voters.

Rep. Alan Harper (R-Northport) will sponsor the bill in the House.

McClendon, who said in a news conference that he frequently hears people talking about driving to neighboring states to buy lottery tickets. “They cannot understand why Alabama doesn’t offer what 44 other states in America offer, and that is the opportunity to have your own lottery. This bill will give them the chance to express themselves.”

He added that his lottery bill would not create a “back door opening” to bring casino gambling to Alabama. “We spent a great deal of time to make it so that this bill is a lottery bill and nothing else.”

McClendon said he hopes the measure could be on the general election ballot in November.



Gary Hanner/The Daily Home

**Members of the St. Clair County Commission are, from left, Tommy Bowers, Jimmy Roberts, Chairman Paul Manning, Jeff Brown and Ken Crowe.**

stands ready to assist every department in any way possible.

“One of the main focuses for 2016 will be to provide skilled workers for our businesses and industries,” Manning said. “Currently, our unemployment rate is 4.8 percent, which is one of the lowest in the state. Employers expanding or coming for the first time need workers who are available. We will be closely looking at the job market and working with the EDC to provide training opportunities whether in the school systems or the public sector to assist those needing training if requested. The commission always provides help with projects in the cities.” Manning said projects on the horizon that are budgeted for 2016 include the Forever Wild project in Springville, Canoe Creek Park near Ashville and the major road projects using local funds.

As for challenges that stand in the way, Manning said the rapid growth that comes with a 32 percent population increased over the past decade.

“Lack of skilled workers also presents challenges,” Manning said. “Unsatisfactory weather conditions present challenges to major road projects as well.”

Manning said his first term on the county commission began in 1977. “Governing bodies never know what challenges there

will be,” he said. “I have never seen a time when the commission, department heads and local agencies did not come together and meet the challenges presented to us. Depending on the particular time and the challenge, we will meet it and we will provide for our county and her people. It always has been and it will continue.”

The St. Clair County Commission meets the second Tuesday of each month in Ashville at 9 a.m. and the fourth Tuesday of each month in Pell City at 9 a.m. Its primary address is 165 5th Avenue, Suite 100 Ashville, AL 35953. The phone number is 205-594-2100. Fax number is 205-594-2110.

Paul Manning is Chairman of the County Commission. He can be reached at 205-812-9636 or pmanning@stclairco.com.

Jeff Brown is commissioner for District 1. He can be reached at 205-365-3896 or jbrown@stclairco.com.

Ken Crowe is commissioner for District 2. He can be reached at 205-365-5114 or kcrowe@stclairco.com.

Tommy Bowers is commissioner for District 3. He can be reached at 205-753-8246 or tbowers@stclairco.com.

Jimmy Roberts is commissioner for District 4. He can be reached at 205-505-9494.

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# Industrial growth to continue in Talladega County

By Chris Norwood  
Home Staff Writer

Industrial growth continued in Talladega County in 2015 and is expected to continue into the coming year, according to Economic Development Authority Executive Director Calvin Miller.

In Talladega, the Virginia Transportation facility on Ironaton Road was one of the major developments of the past year. Virginia Transportation is investing \$2.5 million at the cite, and will employ 53 people at full capacity.

"They'll be taking Hondas from the plant in Lincoln and putting them on CSX rail cars," Miller explained. CSX will operate the yard, creating additional jobs and capital investment, although Miller did not have these figures readily at hand.

Just outside the city, "MTek is still expanding," he continued. "They have 400 employees now and will have 500 by the end of the year. They purchased a speculative building (in the industrial park) a while back, and

they're still adding on to that also."

Atlas Roofing located in Sylacauga in April or May of the past year, manufacturing calcium carbonate based webbing and employing 50 people as this article was being written. "They've already opened up another lane, and they're training people for that expansion now," Miller said.

Heritage Plastics also announced a major expansion this year, investing \$13 million and adding five jobs. "They've expanded every year since they've been here," Miller said.

And of course the other big news in Sylacauga was the reopening of the Bluebell Creameries plant after a national contamination scare. "They had 300 employees before the closure, and 262 of them are already back at work," Miller said. "So all but less than 40 are back at work, but I don't know yet how long those will be out. I know next year they are planning on finishing out their expansion. It was already under way when they closed, but it should get back under way again in 2016."

Meanwhile, in Childersburg,

Project Keystone has just renewed its option on 125 acres of industrial property there.

"They've done all the basework, but their next step is going to depend on the subsidies from Europe," Miller explained. The renewed option extends to July 30, 2017. Whenever the project does go forward, it will involve a \$100 million capital investment and create in the neighborhood of 125 new jobs, depending on the size of the operation.

The company buys trees and turns them into pellets, which are in turn loaded into train cars, sent to the coast, and then carried by ship across the Atlantic Ocean. Once in Europe, the pellets are burned for relatively clean fuel.

"Their 'wood basket' is also in our area, which is one of the reasons they decided to locate here," he added.

Scot Industries, located just outside the Talladega Industrial Park, is also planning an expansion, which will involve a \$5 million capital investment and create 10 to 15 new jobs making tubing for hydraulic systems.

Miller also pointed out the New Fertilizer Technology pilot plant in Sylacauga has created two jobs so far, making polymer coated fertilizer for farmers in the former Marvin's Building. That industry will likely be expanding this year as well.



File photo

A multi-million-dollar rail hub is being constructed by CSX to distribute Honda vehicles across the nation. Honda's transfer facility will employ about 30 employees to run day-to-day operations.



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COMMISSION**


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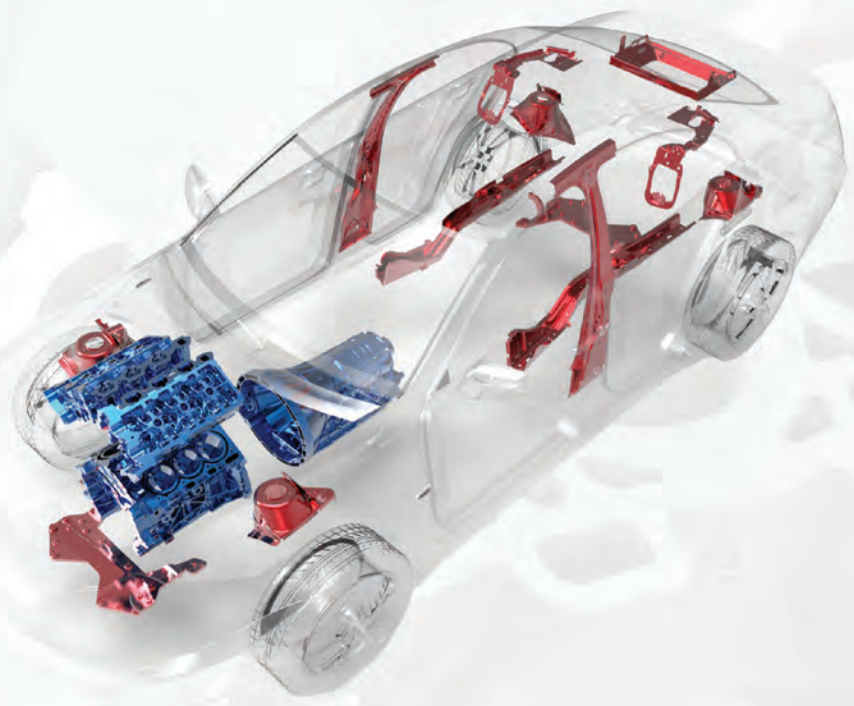
Left to right:  
District One Commissioner Jeff Brown,  
District Two Commissioner Ken Crowe,  
Chairman Paul Manning,  
District Three Commissioner Tommy Bowers and  
District Four Commissioner Jimmy Roberts

Your progressive St. Clair County Commission is working every day to improve our county, provide more jobs for our citizens (even though we already have the 3rd lowest unemployment rate in the state,) improve the infrastructure of roads and bridges, and make our county a better place to rear our children.

The Commission holds regular meetings on the second Tuesday of each month at 9:00 a.m. in the Administrative Center Courthouse Annex #1 in Ashville and on the fourth Tuesday of each month at 9:00 a.m. in the Courthouse in Pell City. Work Sessions and Commission Meetings are Always Open to The Public.



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# Shelby: ‘Stop tinkering with the Second Amendment’

## Senator calls for protection of gun ownership rights

By **BUDDY ROBERTS**  
Special Projects Editor

U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby has said that while he believes the economy has improved, people are still “nervous and frustrated” about it.

“As I travel the state and look at surveys around the nation that we in Alabama are part of, I find that a lot of people are still very anxious about the uncertainty of the economy,” he said.

“They’re talking about it. They should be talking about it. They’re wondering what kind of leadership America is going to have, and they’re hoping for something better.”

America still retains the biggest economy in the world, Shelby said, but that no longer means what it once did.

“We produce more goods and services than any nation in the world, and we are the richest nation in the world. But there is something that every person in America

should pause and think about. I worry about our standing abroad with people in the rest of the world. There once was a lot of respect and fear of America’s military and economic power. That has eroded, especially during the past seven years. Look at the Middle East. Look at the Russians under Putin. They don’t respect or fear America, and that’s a dangerous trend.”

President Obama’s foreign policy, as outlined in last month’s State of the Union address, “has spawned a lot of this,” the senator said, calling it “another political speech full of empty rhetoric that offered no real solutions to the issues facing American families and businesses each day.”

The president, he added, “is poised to leave behind a legacy of failed policies that have damaged our economy and made America weaker across the globe. The American people

deserved to hear from the president about his real, comprehensive plan to defeated ISIS and radical Islamic terrorism. They also deserved to hear that he will not circumvent Congress, unilaterally infringe on law-abiding American’s Second Amendment rights or allow thousands of improperly vetted Syrian refugees into our nation.”

Shelby supported Sen. Ted Cruz’ State Refugee Security Act aimed at amending the Immigration and Nationality Act to allow states’ governors to reject plans to resettle refugees, which he said Democrats have kept from coming up for debate.

“I definitely believe governors have the right to say whether refugees should be allowed to resettle in their states. I absolutely oppose bringing Syrian refugees into this country and believe that we must immediately halt it. We simply cannot trust this administration to put in place the rigorous vetting system needed to ensure that the refugees who enter our nation will not be future threats to our way of life.”



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

**Sen. Richard Shelby visited Eissmann Automotive in Pell City during his annual tour of Alabama counties.**

Acknowledging that many Alabama residents are upset about what he described as “President Obama’s plans to circumvent Congress and attempt to restrict the constitutional right of the American people to keep and bear arms,” Shelby said he supports development of a “super database” to manage gun buying and registration.

“Criminal offenders, would-be terrorists and mentally-challenged individuals do not need a gun, period. If we could get local, state and federal officials to work together – they often say they do, but they don’t always – it could keep guns from falling into the wrong hands, cut down on gun violence and still protect the Second Amendment.”

Late last month, Attorney General Loretta Lynch testified before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice and Science, which oversees funding for the Department of Justice. Shelby serves as the subcommittee’s chairman.

“I asked the attorney general if the Second Amendment is as important as the First. Or the

Fifth. Or the 10th. Or the 14th. She said ‘yes.’ But if the administration believes that, why do they keep tinkering with it? From amnesty to gun control, none of the executive actions...from the president would have prevented recent tragic events in our nation. The president, who wants America to look more like Chicago, should know better than anyone that disarming law-abiding Americans will do nothing more than empower criminals. I’m fighting for America to look more like Alabama. I am an advocate of the Second Amendment, and I want to protect it.”

Shelby, who has served in the Senate since 1986, is seeking reelection to a sixth term and faces opposition in the Republican primary election. He serves as chairman of the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee and as a member of the Appropriations Committee and the Committee on Rules and Administration.

He has declined to endorse a specific candidate seeking the Republican presidential nomination, saying that

“any of them – including those who have dropped out already – would be better than the leadership we have now. The American people are sick and tired of this president’s blatant disregard for the Constitution and policies that prioritize what is best for Washington over what is best for America.”

# Johnson believes the state of Alabama is in better shape



Submitted photo

**Rep. Ronald Johnson, speaking to House members during the 2015 legislative session.**

By **DENISE SINCLAIR**  
Home staff writer

State Rep. Ron Johnson (R-Sylacauga) believes the state of Alabama is in better shape at the start of this year than it was the previous year.

“The Legislature supplied the finances for Medicaid and others that would have been detrimental to the state had that funding not been provided. But we’ve got a tough time coming up this year, too,” Johnson said.

The representative said state government is still going to be short on money and unless funding is found that means a cut in services for the people.

“We’ve got to find a way to fund programs especially for the elderly,” he said.

Johnson said Medicaid officials have said the agency needs \$156 million more from the state this year to provide the same services to its more than 1 million clients.

One issue Johnson believes will be much talked about is a state lottery. “I think you will see the Legislature vote on a lottery. Surveys were run on a state lottery and 80 percent of the Republican legislators and 90 percent of the Democrats want to vote on it,” he said.

The statewide lottery is seeing support on both sides of the aisle, he said.

One proposed bill out of committee, Johnson explained, would make state department heads more accountable for the funding they receive.

Another piece of legislation, he said, is to help taxpayers with small businesses with a tax credit to be provided by legislators.

Right-to-work legislation, he believes can be changed this session without a constitutional amendment.

Johnson said the School Security Task Force is working to find funding for

schools that can’t afford added security. Some schools, he said, don’t have locks and doors that are secured to make sure no one can get into a school building. “Poor school systems can’t afford this. We’ve got to find a way to award them some funding for this.”

Another education bill, the representative says is coming up this legislative session is consideration of a 3 percent pay increase for teachers in K-12 and the two-year college system. The pay increase would not be for four-year colleges, superintendents or principals.

On any local legislation he may be proposing, Johnson said the local governments ask him to sponsor bills. So far, all he has been requested to look at is local legislation for a vote for Sunday alcohol sales

by Childersburg and complaints from Lincoln perhaps passing legislation on lanterns that were evident at the last race at Talladega Superspeedway in 2015.

“There are some that want these lanterns banned because of their capability to cause fires for campers, farmers and other damages,” Johnson said.

The state representative introduced several bills in last year’s session including Sunday alcohol sales votes in Sylacauga and Oak Grove. He also introduced legislation regarding Lincoln’s police jurisdiction and costs for construction by farmers.

The one issue that continues to concern Johnson is funding for Medicaid.

“It is still not funded properly. If the Legislature hadn’t given additional funding to the program, there would have been a 10 to 12 percent cut in beds and services in nursing homes. There was not enough money to pay for that, but it got fixed, and funding remains an issue this year,” he said.

“We’ve got to find a way to fund programs, especially for the elderly.”

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# St. Clair EDC seeks ‘to create jobs, increase wealth and improve the quality of life’

By GARY HANNER  
Home staff writer

The St. Clair County Economic Development Council has been instrumental in shaping the county during the past 15 years, making it one of the most desirable counties in which to work and live.

Don Smith, the EDC’s executive director, said St. Clair has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state at 4.8 percent, and it has new construction in almost every community.

“Our larger local employers -- Unipres, Eissmann, Garrison Steel and Real Alloy -- announced 200 new jobs last year, and almost every employer that we surveyed either maintained their employment level or increased their staff last year,” Smith said.

In looking back at 2015, Smith said several accomplishments were made.

“Last year was the first time all chambers of commerce along I-20 -- Leeds, Moody, Pell City and Talladega -- worked together with the county commission and the EDC on an area Career Expo,”

he said. “The expo was a wonderful success with 400 job seekers connecting with over 40 employers. A similar partnership between the St. Clair County Commission, city of Ashville, and the EDC allowed for another job fair to take place in Ashville. St. Clair County Commission Chairman Paul Manning has stated a number of times that they want every citizen here to have the opportunity for employment.”

Smith said 2015 also showcased the alignment of educational courses with regional workforce demands.

“Both school systems in St. Clair County are moving in this direction,” Smith said. “But Dr. Michael Barber and Dr. Kim Williams with the Pell City School System have really made huge strides by partnering with Jefferson State Community College and our local employers. They have created a clear path towards employment by preparing students for specific fields in healthcare and manufacturing. Each of these paths includes additional opportunities for future education and

even better employment.” Smith was also complimentary about Leadership St. Clair County. “Leadership St. Clair had its first alumni event in 2015 that gave nine years of graduates to reconnect and collaborate,” he said. “This program continues to be a great success and an incredible asset to the community.”

As for what lies ahead on the horizon and the involvement of the EDC, Smith said workforce development in St. Clair County will continue to be



Gary Hanner/The Daily Home

Staff members at the St. Clair County Economic Development Council are, from left, Don Smith, Candice Hill, Jennifer Forman and Jason Roberts.

the focus.

“Jefferson State Community College has announced a \$500,000 expansion at its Pell City campus to accommodate its incredible nursing program as it continues to grow,” Smith said. “I believe will see more career training programs in the high schools and in the private sector. As more people being to retire in the workforce, these programs will be of the highest importance.”

Smith noted that retail and housing will continue

to gain strength as new investments continue at The Shoppes at Grand River in Leeds, the new Publix at The Village at Moody, Odenville’s Highway 174 exit, Pell City’s Bankhead Crossing, and the Springville Station Retail Center and Sports Park.

The St. Clair County EDC is located on the third floor of Jeff State Community College. The address is 500 College Circle, Suite 306, Pell City, AL 35125. Its telephone number is 205-814-1440,

and the fax number is 205-814-1441.

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# Wood: ‘I try my best to get it right’

By DAVID ATCHISON  
Home staff writer

Alabama Rep. Randy Wood (R-Anniston) said his interest in politics came at an early age.

“I have always been interested in politics,” he said. “My dad never ran for office, but he was always involved in the political process.”

He said his father, Gurvis, would help out in political campaigns.

So in 1998, Wood took his first step into the political world, running for an open seat on the Calhoun County Commission.

Wood said his father did not want him to run for political office.

“I think he didn’t want to see me hurt if I lost,” Wood said.

But Wood won and served on the Calhoun County Commission from 1998-2002.

He credited his father for his successful run at the local office.

“He was so well respected,” Wood said. “I hoped people were convinced that I was trustworthy like he was.”

Wood, who owns an automobile body shop, said he always believed that someone shouldn’t get into political office for money.

“I always felt you shouldn’t depend on a political career for a living,” he said.

After serving on the Calhoun County Commission, Wood was successfully elected to the House of Representatives.

“I knew Mike Rogers was going to run for Congress and there would be an open seat,” he said.

Wood said he had been in Montgomery and seen the legislative process up close as a county commissioner.

He knew the opening his House district was an opportunity for him, but

there was still uncertainty whether he would be elected. He had a Democratic Republican opponent running against him.



Rep. Randy Wood

“I was fortunate to come out on top,” Wood said.

He has continued to serve in the House for the past 14 years, and his is current term ends in 2018.

Wood said he always tries to base his decisions on the majority of his constituents.

“I try my best,” he said. “I try to get it right, but you are not going to satisfy everyone.”

Wood said he is involved in 3 or 4 bills every year.

“I always sponsor the Fraternal Order of Police bills,” he said.

Wood said the job of the state legislators is to balance the General and the Education Trust Fund Budgets.

He said that was one of the biggest accomplishments last year, with the shortfalls in revenue.

Wood said the Education Budget was passed in the regular session, but lawmakers had to return for two special sessions to nail down the General Fund Budget. He said balancing the General Fund Budget in the upcoming session will be another challenge for legislators.

“We’re still not in the best financial condition, but we are a whole lot better than last year,” he said.

Woods said there was a \$225 million shortfall in the General Fund Budget last year, but there should only be about a \$30-\$40 million shortfall this year.

“It’s still an uphill battle, but I rather be hurting \$30 million than \$225 million,” he said.

Legislators approved a cigarette tax hike last year to help last year’s budget shortfall.

“I don’t like any kind of taxes or fees, but I would rather hurt the fewest number of people, if we do have to increase taxes,” he said.

He said the state’s cigarette tax is still lower than Alabama’s neighboring state, Georgia.

Wood said there was also a cut in state personnel, and the state has about 5,000 fewer employees, while services remain in place.

“We didn’t do it by firing people,” he said. “We did it through nutrition.”

He expects some new high-profile bills to surface in the upcoming legislative session, including a possible lottery bill.

“I’m not a lottery fan,” Wood said, but he would support a bill allowing the people to vote on whether the state should have a lottery.

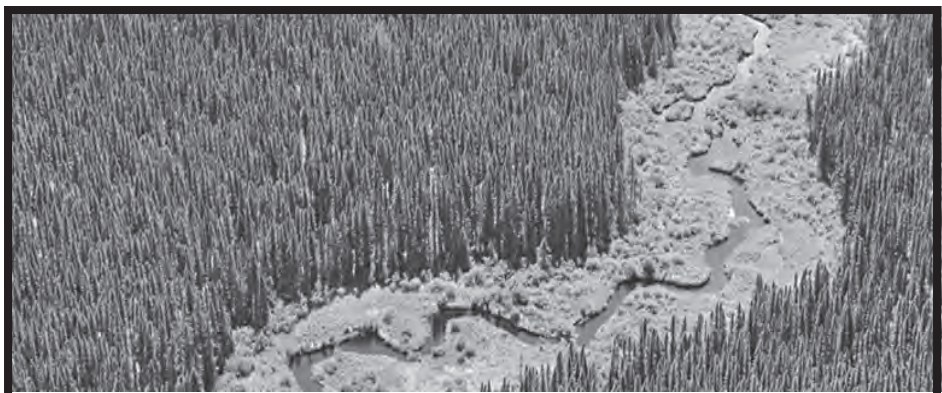
He said legislation needs to be simple.

He said about 75 percent of the proceeds from the lottery could help fund the General Fund Budget and about 25 percent could fund education.

“If you have people to piggy-back other bills to it, I think it will kill it,” Wood said.

He also expects legislators to introduce gun bills this legislative session.

“We’re going to do everything we can to make sure that Alabama people have rights to bear arms,”



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# Congress begins 2016 with attempt to appeal Obamacare

By **BUDDY ROBERTS**  
Special Projects Editor

A measure to repeal the federal Affordable Care Act may have been vetoed by President Barack Obama, but U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers considers it significant that it was approved this year by both the U.S. House and Senate.

“I was thrilled that this bill passed both chambers and finally went to President Obama’s desk,” the congressman said early last month after the Restoring Americans’ Health Care Freedom Reconciliation Act was approved by the House, 240-181. The Senate had approved it in December. As expected, it was vetoed by the president a few days after the act had gained House approval, but it was the first time in more than 60 votes that the Republican-controlled Congress was able to submit a plan repealing all or part of Obamacare to the White House.

“We still are not anywhere close to the two-third majority needed to override the veto, because the Democrats left in Congress after the 2010 elections are true believers in Obamacare, but the American people have been very clear in their priorities that this flawed

health care law just does not work for them,” Rogers said. “It is harmful to the health and financial security of millions of Americans.”

Besides repealing the Affordable Care Act, the measure would have removed federal funding for Planned Parenthood and reduced federal deficits during the next decade by an estimated \$78.1 billion. “Planned Parenthood must not be a wholesale provider of abortions, and government spending must be kept in check,” Rogers said.

“Now, President Obama has made the choice of standing against the priorities of Americans by vetoing the repeal bill.”

The presidential veto may have made the act largely symbolic, but the congressman believes Democrats succeeded in directing attention away from its significance by calling for stricter gun control laws.

“The president used the San Bernardino terrorist attack as a plea for tighter gun con-

trol measures in an attempt to direct attention away from the fact that he vetoed the repeal of Obamacare,” he said. “And it worked. It got everybody all stirred up and worried about losing their Second Amendment rights. I will fight against any effort by the Obama Administration to restrict them, and one thing I feel confident about is that your Second Amendment rights are safe from him.”

Rogers recently co-sponsored the Separation of Powers Restoration and Second Amendment Protection Act in an attempt to prevent President Obama from

using executive action to tighten gun control laws.

“During his time in office, the president has shown blatant disregard for the constitutional rights of Americans by circumventing Congress and our lawmaking process to do whatever he wants,” he said. “This legislation would make any executive action that infringes

on the power of Congress or on the Second Amendment be null and void while prohibiting funds for it. The strategy of administrative action is an attempt by the anti-gun left to chip away at our rights until the government gets control of everything in our lives.”

Rogers said he feels “a lot of anger being directed at the federal government, and that’s because legislatively, nothing has happened up here (in Washington) for the past five years. It’s been a stalemate. We do the basics to keep the government operating, and that’s about it. What the president has shown the American people since he’s been in office is how powerful the executive branch can be and is. The people who run such agencies as the EPA, OSHA, Homeland Security and the Justice Department work for him, and he has been able to use these agencies to do things to advance his agenda and affect people’s lives through administration rather than legislation.”

A member of the House Agriculture, Homeland Security and Armed Services committees, Rogers has also been critical of the president for the administration’s position on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and opposed the House Consolidated Appropriations Act because it included funding for the Syrian Refugee Plan.

“It did not prohibit funding to bring refugees from the Syrian conflict to America,” he said. “What happened in California demonstrates that Islamic terrorists are ready and willing to use our tax immigration system to enter our country to do us harm. Now President Obama will be able to carry out his plan to let thousands of refugees from the Syrian conflict into the U.S. I have no confidence that these refugees can be properly vetted by this administration.

“The cowardly terrorist attack in California was a horrific tragedy. It is terrifying that the female shooting suspect, Tashfeen Malik, pledged ISIS loyalties and made it through the U.S. visa process undetected. With such apparent gaps in the screening process, it demonstrates that President Obama’s plan to allow Syrian refugees into our country is dangerous and flawed. These terrorists are finding their way into our country without our help. Knowing this, how in

the world can we trust the Obama Administration’s ability to properly vet thousands of refugees?”


The congressman called for the United States to “be diligent in ensuring we keep out those who wish us harm and do our best to protect our national security, and I can’t overstate how much ISIS is our biggest threat. It is ominous and real. These are people who hate us and will bring terror to us if we don’t stop them over there. They’ve said they’re going to, and the reckless plan to allow thousands of refugees into our country could put us in danger.”

A few days before the Feb. 1 Iowa Republican caucus, Rogers said he “will be so happy when the field gets down to two or three candidates,” adding that history favors there being a Republican in the White House next January.

“If you look at history, there have only been two occasions when the same party kept the presidency for more than eight years – that was Roosevelt and Truman and Reagan and George H.W. Bush. The country is generally sick of the same party after eight years, so history is on the side of there being a change of parties, but you never know.”



Congressman Mike Rogers, during a House Armed Services Committee hearing in Washington.



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# Construction industry drives job gains during 2015

## Local unemployment rates near or lower than state's

By **BUDDY ROBERTS**  
Special Projects Editor

St. Clair County ended 2015 with an unemployment rate lower than that for the entire state, while Talladega County's December rate was one-tenth of a percent greater than Alabama's, Gov. Robert Bentley said last month.

"In January 2015, economists predicted that wage and salary employment would grow in Alabama by 33,800, and we surpassed that number by more than 10,000 jobs," the governor said. "Employers are hiring in Alabama, and these numbers prove it. We will continue our efforts to recruit and add jobs to the economy in 2016."

St. Clair's unemployment rate for December was 5 percent, less than the state's seasonally-adjusted rate of 6.2. The county's civilian labor force was

38,356 that month, with 1,905 individuals unemployed, according to the Alabama Department of Labor.

Talladega County's unemployment rate for the same month was 6.3 percent, equal to 2,200 out-of-work members of its civilian work force of 34,988.

"Although a slight increase in the unemployment rate is never celebrated, (the December) increase is attributed to the fact that the labor force increased by nearly 10,000, while people were out looking for work, seasonal or otherwise," said Fitzgerald Washington, Alabama's commissioner of labor. "December's labor force count was on par with the summer months, which is traditionally when the most people are searching for work. Increases in the labor force represent increased confidence in



File photo

**A construction crew prepares the foundation for the new Pizza Hut restaurant in Talladega.**

the job market."

Alabama's civilian labor force measured 2,154,771 in December. Wage and salary employment increased by 45,500 jobs

during 2015, according to Bentley, with most of the gains in education and health services, leisure and hospitality, trade, transportation and utilities and

construction.

"The construction industry has experienced its best year in five years," Washington said. "Construction employ-

ment is a great indicator of economic health. Construction doesn't drive the economy, but the economy drives construction."

# McMillan: 'Talladega and St. Clair are significant'

By **BUDDY ROBERTS**  
Special Projects Editor

Agriculture and forestry make up almost 40 percent of Alabama's economy, which means Talladega and St. Clair counties make significant contributions to the state's annual output of \$70.4 billion, according to John McMillan, commissioner of agriculture and industries.

"Talladega and St. Clair are significant forestry and agribusiness counties, so they're an important part of the backbone of Alabama's economy," he said. "Alabama's agriculture, agribusiness,

forestry and forest products industries are projected to enjoy a golden age of sustained growth, thanks to a number of factors, not the least of which are our great state's natural resources and human resources such as in Talladega and St. Clair."

During 2015, the steering committee for the Alabama Agriculture & Forestry Strategic Plan presented to Gov. Robert Bentley a report calling for a more cooperative relationship between business and government that, if enacted, could create as many as 58,000 new jobs in Alabama and add \$7 billion to the state's

economy by 2020, McMillan said.

"Our steering committee and commodity groups representing the entire spectrum of Alabama's agriculture and forestry industries have spent several hundred hours working on this strategic plan, which includes steps to foster capital investment, develop a quality workforce, maintain transportation infrastructure, expand markets and trade, strengthen the land grant mission and promote economic development with state agency collaboration."

Changing commodity prices and wet weather presented some challenges to

agricultural and forestry in Alabama during 2015, the commissioner said, adding that he's "hopeful and cautiously optimistic about how 2016 will be. Everything is a global market nowadays, and we have to look at it that way. We definitely have some good opportunities looking ahead, especially in growing alternative crops and with research and development in the forestry industry. I believe we'll see a breakthrough in cellulosic energy at some point, and that will be very significant for forestry in Alabama."



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# Honda of Alabama: 15 years in Lincoln

## 2017 Ridgeline to drive off assembly line here

By **BUDDY ROBERTS**  
Special Projects Editor

As it marks 15 years of operation in Talladega County, Honda Manufacturing of Alabama produced almost 350,000 vehicles in Lincoln last year, helping the automaker set an all-time record for single-year North American auto production.

“We are extremely proud of the record-setting efforts of our associates, which was key to our ability to meet record demand from our customers in North America for Honda and Acura vehicles,” said Takuji Yamada, president of Honda North America Inc. “Our dedicated team of associates is committed to producing high-quality products our customers have come to expect.”

Honda Manufacturing of Alabama employs more than 4,500 associates and is the sole producer of the Odyssey minivan, Pilot SUV, Ridgeline truck and Acura MDX. The Lincoln associates’ efforts contributed to the total production of 1,862,491 vehicles, a 3.1 percent increase greater than the previous record set in 2014.

“Production flexibility has long been a hallmark of Honda’s North American manufacturing success, enabling us to add production of new models and move production between plants to optimize capacity and meet the changing needs of our customers,” Yamada said. “In 2015, this included the startup of production of the Pilot and dual source production of the Acura MDX, in addition to existing production in Alabama.”

Early last month, Honda unveiled the new 2017 Ridgeline truck at the North American International Auto Show.

“Once again, we are challenging conventional thinking in the pickup truck market with Honda-exclusive features, design and technology that help Ridgeline set new benchmarks for versatility, capability and comfort in a midsize pickup,” said John Mendel, executive vice president of American Honda Motor Co. Inc.

To be produced in Lincoln, the new Ridgeline will launch before summer, offering “features and capabilities unlike anything else on the market today,” according to Mendel, listing five.

“Superior on-road performance – with the segment’s best handling, ride quality, cabin quietness and all-weather traction capabilities – courtesy of its unibody construction and sophisticated chassis.

“Class-leading space with the largest and most versatile cabin and the only 4-foot-wide flat bed space in the midsize pickup segment, along with payload capability rivaling top competitors.

“Innovate and class-exclusive features, including an In-Bed Trunk, dual-action tailgate and the industry’s first in-bed audio system, making Ridgeline the ultimate tailgating vehicle.

“Targeted top in-class acceleration, EPA fuel economy ratings and third-party collision safety ratings, featuring Honda’s next-generation ACE body structure and available Honda sensing suite of safety and driver-assist technologies.

“We are bringing our unique technology and original thinking to the market in a new and challenging concept for a Honda pickup. We think we’ve got a better idea, a truck that uses its unibody

construction and Honda packaging magic to deliver more of the things that many of today’s truck customers want and need with none of the things they don’t.”

The new Ridgeline will be powered by a 3.5-liter, direct-injected i-VTEC V-6 engine with a six-speed automatic transmission. It will be available for the first time in both front-wheel and all-wheel drive configurations. All-wheel drive models will use Honda’s Intelligent Terrain Management with normal, sand, snow and mud moves, “providing robust medium-duty off-road and towing capability with superior on-road, all-weather handling, traction and performance,” Mendel said.

“Inside, the Ridgeline boasts the largest, most versatile and sophisticated cabin in a midsize 4-door pickup, featuring high-grade materials and finishes, available leather trim and all the latest technologies Honda has to offer, including tri-zone climate control, push button start, a full-color TFT center meter and available 8-inch Display Audio touchscreen with Apple Car Play and Android Auto capability.

“The Ridgeline’s 60/40-split and folding second-row seat provides the ultimate versatility for hauling both people and cargo. With the seats folded down, the Ridgeline will comfortably carry up to five people while still accommodating long items, like a set of golf



Submitted photo

**Honda’s Alabama plant will soon begin producing the 2017 Ridgeline. The pickup truck will be available this fall, with a MSRP starting at \$30,000. The Lincoln manufacturer helped the automaker surpass its North American production record in 2015.**

clubs, under the rear seat,” Mendel said. “Folding up one or both sides of the 60/40-split seat bottom opens up the back to carry tall and bulk items.”

The truck’s bed will offer several features exclusive to Honda vehicles, such as an In-Bed Trunk, dual-action tailgate and available 400-watt AC power inverter. The In-Bed Trunk provides secure storage with a fully-flat floor and a drain plug for easier cleaning and evacuation of water from the trunk. The tailgate is hinged at the bottom along the left side, opening down or to the side, enabling easier loading and unloading of heavy and bulky items

without having to reach over the tailgate.

The bed also features eight 350-pound tie-down cleats. The power inverter is behind an access panel in the right bed wall, offering the capacity to recharge power tools or power such items as tailgate blenders and television sets.

“The new in-bed audio system, together with the In-Bed Trunk and power inverter, makes the Ridgeline the ultimate tailgating vehicle,” Mendel said. “The audio system utilizes six exciters inside the bed walls, in place of conventional speakers, pumping out sound from the Ridgeline’s audio head unit, with up to 540 watts

of power.”

Honda officials said they are also proud of the truck’s “top-level safety performance” features, which include next-generation ACE body structure, advanced airbag systems and available Honda Sensing suite of safety and driver-assist technologies.

“The new Ridgeline will target the highest available collision safety ratings – an NCAP 5-star Overall Vehicle Score from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and a Top Safety Pick + rating from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety,” Mendel said. “Honda Sensing technologies available on

the 2017 Ridgeline include Lane Departure Warning, Collision Mitigation Braking System, Forward Collision Warning, Road Departure Mitigation and Lane Keeping Assist.”

All Ridgeline models will feature a multi-angle rearview camera as standard equipment and upper trims will be available with either Honda Lane Watch or Blind Spot Information system, he added. “Like the first-generation Ridgeline, the all-new 2017 Ridgeline was designed and developed by Honda R&D Americas and will be produced by Honda Manufacturing of Alabama in Lincoln.”



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home/file

**Employees at Honda Manufacturing put the final touches on Honda Pilots.**



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# Shelnutt: No new taxes this year and maybe a raise for teachers

By **BUDDY ROBERTS**  
Special Projects Editor

The 2015 legislative session was everything Shay Shelnutt expected it to be.

“And more,” the first-term Republican said. “I didn’t expect two special sessions, but we were able to oppose about \$500 million in new taxes, so I’m happy about that.”

Shelnutt represents Senate District 17, which includes Lincoln, Eastaboga, Ashville and Ragland, besides parts of Jefferson and Blount counties. A few days before returning to Montgomery for the start of his sophomore session, he said he expected “most of the debate to be about the general fund budget again. So far, the governor isn’t proposing any new taxes, which is good, and there should be enough funds available to give teachers a raise this year. The numbers being thrown around are about five percent.”

Pledging not to support a bud-

get proposal that would raise taxes or impose new taxes, the senator said he expects most state lawmakers to do the same. “Last year, we defeated a gas tax, and there was even a soda tax floating around for a while, but it didn’t have a lot of legs. If it moves, there will be an effort to tax it, but the sky didn’t fall in, and nobody’s called screaming at me for not voting for more taxes.”

“I didn’t expect two special sessions, but we were able to oppose about \$500 million in new taxes,

Going into the 2015 session, Shelnutt said he did not support a state lottery and said last month that “I’ve got concerns about the current (proposed lottery) bill” as introduced by Sen. Jim McClendon (R-Springville). “It includes no plan on where the money will go. I’m in favor of letting people vote on it, but we need to know more about how it will work first.”

Shelnutt serves on the Senate Education Policy, Banking and Insurance and Confirmations committees. “Most people don’t realize the number of bills that are introduced every session. There

can be 1,000 to 1,500, dealing with every subject from the official state dessert to guns and everything else. There’s no way we can be experts on that many subjects. Sometimes we’re reading a bill for the first time as it’s being discussed and about to be voted on. That’s how sometimes a bill can slip through and we don’t know the consequences until it’s passed. I wish we had a lot more time to consider and debate the bills.”



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Submitted Photos

State Sen. Shay Shelnutt with U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz. Shelnutt has endorsed Cruz’ candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination.



“I wish we had a lot more time to consider and debate bills,” Shelnutt said. The legislature considers as many as 1,500 bills per session, “dealing with every subject from the official state dessert to guns.”



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# Governor praises Alabama's economic, industrial growth

## Names Syrian refugees, child abuse prevention as important issues



Submitted photo

**Gov. Robert Bentley signs the state budget bill, which the Legislature approved following two special sessions in 2015.**

**By BUDDY ROBERTS**  
Special Projects Editor

Alabama has been named 2015 State of the Year by Business Facilities magazine, a designation Gov. Robert Bentley attributed to statewide industrial and economic development.

“This has been an extremely successful year for economic development in Alabama, and this ranking is fantastic news,” the governor said. “Our chief focus continues to revolve around creating jobs and new opportunities for residents across the state.”

In choosing Alabama for the state of the year selection, Business Facilities considered industrial development projects in terms of jobs creation and capital investment between Oct. 1, 2014, and Nov. 1, 2015, finding that the state has “brought in a bevy of big-ticket projects that provide a solid foundation for future growth,” according to Jack Rogers, a spokesman for the New Jersey-based media company.

“With Mercedes-Benz and Airbus anchoring its top-tier positions in automotive and aerospace manufacturing, an expanding high-tech hub and forward-thinking leadership in 21st century workforce training, Alabama has put together a winning combination that’s tough to beat,” he said.

Among the projects cited are three in central Alabama: Mercedes’ plans for a \$1.3 billion expansion to its assembly plant in Tuscaloosa County, auto supplier Kamtek’s \$530 million investment to add an aluminum casting line to its Birmingham operation and Yorozu’s plans to open an auto suspension parts plant in Walker County.

“Alabama’s economic team will continue to work tirelessly to bring companies such as Google and Polaris to the state, and our support system will help these firms achieve success,” said Greg Canfield, state secretary of commerce. “Our ability to attract new companies of this caliber makes a strong statement about doing business in Alabama. With the new ‘Made in Alabama’ incentives platform prioritized by Gov. Bentley and the Legislature and a streamlined approach to workforce development, we will enhance the state’s competitiveness in 2016 and beyond.”

The governor agreed. “I believe we are well-positioned to do that thanks to the state’s skilled workforce, great job-training programs and a business environment that promotes growth,” he said.

Alabama’s selection as state of the year came shortly before Bentley delivered his annual state of the state address earlier this month and at about the same that the governor acted or commented on other issues affecting the state.

### Refugee resettlement

Bentley announced that the state has filed a lawsuit against the federal government alleging non-compliance with the Refugee Act of 1980, which requires federal officials to consult with states before refugees from other countries are relocated within their borders. The governor said such a consultation has not happened.

“On three separate occasions I have sent letters to the White House requesting information on the Refugee Reception Program in Alabama, and these letters have gone unanswered,” he said. “As governor, the Alabama constitution gives me the sovereign

authority and solemn duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of all citizens. The process and manner in which the Obama Administration and the federal government are executing the Refugee Reception Program is blatantly excluding the states.”

Defendants named in the state’s legal action include the U.S. State Department, the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Refugee Resettlement. It charges that the agencies have failed to provide the state with sufficient information about refugees who have settled or will be settled in Alabama.

The lawsuit asks that the court award state officials with a declaration that the federal agencies have not complied with the 36-year-old refugee act and compel them to provide the state with complete files on individual refugees and their medical histories and certification that they pose no security risks.

“The failure to provide this information has inhibited Alabama from being able to adequately plan for the arrival of any refugees in regards to such matters as security and requests for social services and public assistance,” Bentley said. “My number one concern is the safety of the people of Alabama and making sure an outdated, archaic and dangerous process that excludes the

states is eliminated. We simply cannot have a federal program that impacts states yet doesn’t allow states to access critical information.”

### Child abuse prevention

Bentley met with members of the Governor’s Task Force on Prevention of Sexual Abuse of Children, established after the Legislature approved Erin’s Law, named for Erin Merryn, a child sexual abuse survivor and proponent of measures requiring public schools to provide abuse prevention instruction to students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Alabama was the 25th state to enact the legislation.

“Protecting Alabama’s children is critical, and I want to ensure the state is properly educating students and teachers on how to recognize this despicable crime and report it,” the governor said. “The task force worked hard over the last several months to provide guidelines for child sexual abuse prevention instructional programs in public schools.”

Among the task force’s recommendations is orientation for middle and high school students about “peer-to-peer” sexual abuse crimes, conducted at the beginning of each school year by school resource officers, principals or representatives of child advocacy centers, district attorney’s offices or the Alabama Department of Human Resources.

### Transparency for taxpayers

Open Alabama, described as the state’s online checkbook, has been re-launched as part of the State of Alabama’s Accounting and Resource System (STAARS), an information technology update designed to increase efficiency and improve customer service for taxpayers and vendors who do business with the state.

“This is an important transparency tool that allows taxpayers to view the financial operations of government,” Bentley said. “Now that the upgrade of our archaic financial software is being implemented, the result is a significant improvement in the way state government handles business.”

The upgrade of the state’s information technology system began during the 2013 legislative session when Sen. Phil Williams (R-Rainbow City), whose district includes St. Clair County, sponsored a Senate bill to coordinate the purchasing and management of IT systems throughout the state.

“It is expected to save taxpayers millions of dollars in the future,” Bentley said. “The upgraded system is highly automated and will make doing business with state government more efficient. The 20 largest state agencies began using the software in October at the start of Fiscal Year 2016, and they are becoming increasingly more proficient with the upgraded software.”

### Gun Control

Bentley has encouraged Alabama residents to contact members of the state’s congressional delegation and ask them to fight what he called “President Obama’s efforts to hinder Americans’ right to bear arms.”

## Marsh: Expect a lottery debate

The state Legislature will consider a lottery proposal this year, said Sen. Del Marsh, although he couldn’t say “at this point what its chances are.”

Sponsored by Sen. Jim McClendon, R-Springville, the measure would ask voters to approve or reject a constitutional amendment authorizing a state lottery.

Marsh said that, in his position as Senate pro tem, he is neither supporting nor opposing the plan “at this time. I would like for there to be

a fair debate about it, and it may be that we look at a more comprehensive gaming bill. My take is that if we’re going to go in that direction (toward gaming), we should look at which is going to benefit the state more.”

According to Marsh, a “more comprehensive gaming bill” could bring in \$1.2 billion annually to the state, compared to \$50 million to \$150 million in revenue from a lottery alone. Such a plan was considered during the 2015 legislative session, but “it didn’t get much traction,” he said.



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# Williams opposes new taxes, calls for more answers about state lottery

By **BUDDY ROBERTS**  
Special Projects Editor

Debates about tax increases, religious freedom and a proposed state lottery are likely to occupy the Alabama General Assembly during the 2016 session, according to Sen. Phil Williams (R-Rainbow City).

"One of the things we'll be looking at is a call for a gas tax to fund public infrastructure — roads and bridges," he said. "I'm not in favor of adding a new tax, so I want to see us look at alternative means for funding those needs."

A second-term senator who represents the 10th District — which includes Steele, Ragland, Ashville and Shoal Creek in St. Clair County, besides Etowah County and part of Cherokee and DeKalb — Williams chairs the Senate Committee on Fiscal Responsibility and Economic Development. He said he hopes the Legislature will continue moving in the financial direction it turned toward last year.

"In 2015, we passed one of the largest education budgets ever, and it came in the first two weeks of the regular session. Then the battles for the general fund started. During the process, we rejected a number of calls to raise taxes, and I'm one of the few who voted against any new tax measures."

Williams was "one of the chief proponents" of a measure adopted last year aimed at equalizing the growth of the general fund toward that of the education budget.

"As a body, we addressed the issue of why the education budget always has a surplus and the general fund is continually lagging behind. Alabama is one of only three states that have a split budget, which is part of the reason why the budget is such an issue every year. In years past, the education lobby worked to get all of what we call growth revenue — revenue that goes up when the economy grows — attached to the education budget. That meant that the general fund budget, which funds everything other than education, did not grow to keep up with the cost of operating state agencies and services."

During the 2015 session, lawmakers "returned" \$80 million in growth taxes to the general fund. "It's the first time in anybody's memory that the general fund will benefit from growth revenue, and we did it from the education budget surplus, without harming the very strong education budget. That allowed us to use growth taxes for things like prisons and Medicaid, which take up roughly 55 percent of the general fund by themselves."

A bill has been pre-filed that would allow voters to approve or reject a state lottery to benefit the state's coffers, but Williams said he has "reservations" about the bill.

"As it is now, it's the equivalent of asking 'Do you like me? Check yes or no.' There are still some questions that need to be answered, such as, where will the funds go? Are we setting up a state lottery or joining Powerball? Who will be in charge of ethics and oversight? Right now, there's nothing but a promise that the Legislature will figure it all out later. The Legislature is a necessary evil — I'm a part of it, and I understand that, but it's not wise to leave things unanswered that could be changed or taken advantage of by future legislatures and personal agendas."

Williams said he is not personally in favor of a state lottery, but he does support a referendum that would allow voters to decide the issue.

The Legislature may also revisit the debate about religious freedoms, but according to Williams, it won't be because of Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore's order that probate judges should not issue same-sex marriage licenses.

"It will not be in response to that nor will the debate be limited to same sex marriage," the senator said. "This is a question of whether or not people who make decisions based on faith can be forced to provide services through their jobs, personal businesses or government service or in any other way be compelled to do things that violate their consciences."

The issue returned to Alabama headlines in early January when Moore issued an administrative order that the state's probate judges should stop issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples because the state supreme court has not lifted last year's order against issuing the licenses, despite the U.S. Supreme Court ruling effectively legalized same-sex marriages nationwide.

"I believe it's part of an overall question the Legislature will have some debate on in response to the overall liberal agenda nationwide that wants to tell you that what you believe doesn't matter any more," Williams said.

Williams' other committee assignments include serving as vice chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and a member of the Rules, Government Affairs, Veterans and Military Affairs committees, the Joint Transportation Committee and the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) Oversight Committee.

Besides the 2015 budget measures, he identified the establishment of a board of trustees for the state's two-year college system as a significant accomplishment of the past legislative session.

"The two-year college system is a great educational and economic partner for the state, but it had never had a board of trustees before, and it needed one," he said. "I have four campuses of Gadsden State Community College in my district, and I'm very aware of how big an employer and great asset to the education of our folks these colleges are."

While it took two special sessions to approve the 2015 general fund budget, Williams doesn't expect such a lengthy process this session.

"Sometimes people ask me why we couldn't get it all done in the regular session last year. My answer is that we did, but the governor didn't like the budget we sent him. And as a lawyer, I've never seen a case of any significance go to trial on the first date. It always gets continued, and Alabama benefited from the budget getting continued for two sessions because we're not paying any more taxes."



**Sen. Phil Williams**

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# Randy Wood



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# Hill names funding for courts, prison reform as accomplishments

**By BUDDY ROBERTS**  
**Special Projects Editor**

First-term legislator Rep. Jim Hill (R-St. Clair County) said shortly before the state House of Representatives convened Feb. 2 that, while he had no plans to introduce local legislation this session, “if something needs to be done, we’re in a position to get it done as was the case last year.”

Hill supported local measures last year allowing some St. Clair municipalities to hold referendums about Sunday alcohol sales. “Every community I know of that placed it on the ballot, it passed, so that was significant.”

Another significant step taken by the Legislature during the 2015 session was that the state’s court system was funded at the same level

it was during 2014. “Different parts of the government received less than they had the year before, but it was a good thing that the level of funding for the courts remained the same. That doesn’t mean that the court system is now adequately funded, but we funded it all we could. Like prison reform, it wasn’t good enough, but level funding is better than suffering cuts.”

Hill also supported a prison reform plan that gained approval last year to address overpopulation in Alabama’s correctional facilities, some of which are “at double their design capacity. What we approved is aimed



Rep. Jim Hill

at bringing it down to 130 or 140 percent, which is probably still too high, but it’s a significant decrease from where it is now.”

A lawyer and jurist who served for a decade as St. Clair County’s presiding circuit judge before being elected to the Legislature, Hill serves as Of Counsel for the firm of Hill, Weisskopf & Hill. House leadership assigned him to the Judiciary Committee, where he draws from his legal experience while considering “any bill that affects the court system, criminal law, probate courts and retirement for district attorneys, judges and clerks. Not all of them come out,

but it’s amazing the sheer number of bills that come before our committee.”

Hill said he is one of “probably a dozen lawyers in the Legislature and the only member of the Legislature who has served on the bench. I would like for us to have more from the legal profession in the House and Senate because we’re used to working with the statutes and can be effective at keeping laws as specific and on target as we can. I hate to read a bill that’s ambiguous. They need to be as clear as we can make them.”

Acknowledging that he’d never been part of a legislative body before the 2015 session and “nothing is all exactly the way you wish it would be, I enjoyed working on the bills that came through, especially the ones that affected my

district. I’m still trying to figure some things out, but from being a part of it, I do believe our system of government operates well.”

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# Zero-based budgets will be a top priority

**By ELSIE HODNETT**  
**Home staff writer**

Rep. Mack Butler believes the general fund budget will be the biggest issue lawmakers will grapple with this legislative session.

“Our government is still seeking to grow larger, but we must continue to rein in government, as it’s still much too large,” he said.

Butler said the general fund budget will once again be the biggest challenge to face.

“My biggest priority is funding the essential basics of government without giving it any ability to grow,” he said. “The education budget will be

good as it continues to grow, but the challenges are once again with the general fund. Prisons and Medicaid are where much growth continues, and I think we need to limit both at not a dollar amount but at a set percentage of the budget, otherwise they could consume it all.

“Having zero-based budgets for most state agencies will also be a top priority. Hopefully we will no longer start at last year’s appropriation and instead start at zero and have the agency justify their appropriation request.”

Butler said there were many successes last session. “I’m particularly proud to have sponsored

the Student Religious Freedom Bill which was signed into law on the National Day of Prayer.”

How to contact Rep. Butler  
334-242-7446  
mack.butler@alhouse.gov

Submitted photo

The general fund budget will be the 2016 Legislature’s biggest challenge, according to State Rep. Mack Butler.

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