

OUR VIEW

A plea for solutions in session

They say those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

With that in mind, it's a good time to ponder what our local officials have learned over the past year heading into the new regular session of the Alabama Legislature.

A year ago, it was obvious that our local lawmakers needed to pass a legislative fix for Jefferson County's financial crisis.

The county had just filed the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history and was struggling to cope with the loss of millions in revenue after its occupational tax was ruled unconstitutional.

As we know, the session ended without a solution for the county, leading to months of tough financial decisions, job losses and hardships.

You would think those subsequent struggles would have lawmakers rushing south with plans to help the county.

Sadly, that doesn't seem to be the case.

Instead, some lawmakers have vowed to fight the county.

Rep. John Rogers was quoted by the Birmingham News as saying there will be a "full-fledged war" against Jefferson County from some members of the local delegation.

When we utter the phrase, "lack of regional cooperation," this is the type of sentiment that comes to mind.

Much of the current discord stems from the end of inpatient care at Cooper Green Mercy Hospital.

Whether you agree with that decision or the transition process, it's clear the county had little choice from a fiscal perspective.

And it's worth noting that the Cooper Green decision – and many of the other recent tough choices made by commissioners – were impacted by the Legislature's refusal to address the county's financial woes.

But playing the blame game is useless. That's particularly true in this case when many of the individuals ultimately responsible for Jefferson County's situation are either in jail or out of office.

When the session kicks off, our legislative officials need to put re-election concerns and political posturing aside to make the best decision for their constituents.

Ultimately, that means giving the county the legislative assistance it needs.

FROM THE BBJ ARCHIVES



15 years ago

A study said HealthSouth Corp. CEO Richard Scrusby was the nation's highest paid health care CEO after earning \$11.4 million in 1996.

10 years ago

Brookwood Medical Center topped our list of the largest outpatient surgical facilities, with more than 18,700 surgeries in 2001.

Five years ago

Renasant Bank said it planned to relocate its Alabama headquarters to downtown Birmingham.

GAINERS & LOSERS



A Birmingham company has landed the project management contract for the \$600 million Airbus plant in Mobile.

Hoar

It didn't take long for a Birmingham firm to land a big Airbus contract. Hoar Program Management will oversee the design and construction of the new \$600 million assembly plant in Mobile.

Biz confidence

The Dow may be above 14,000 again, but it's not doing much for state executives. The Alabama Business Confidence Index declined for the third straight quarter due to lingering concerns over the fiscal debate.

Otelco

The Oneonta-based telecommunications company is exploring Chapter 11 bankruptcy as it seeks to cut debt after losing a major contract and recent Federal Communication Commission rulings that threaten its revenue.

Alabama is not in the liquor business

A reported plan to introduce legislation that would privatize the Alcohol Beverage Control stores in Alabama fails to consider several important facts.

Legislators are to be commended for their desire to cut spending on the state level, especially during these difficult economic times, but cutting time-tested controls on alcohol use and abuse may end up costing the state more money, not less. After the repeal of Prohibition, states were given the authority to regulate, control and limit the flow of alcoholic beverages due to the mind-altering and addictive nature of the drug. Alabama's leaders at the time wisely decided to establish the Alcohol Beverage Control Board to implement such regulations for the benefit and safety of Alabama's citizens.

The most significant result of the ABC board's work has been that Alabama ranks 48th in per capita consumption of alcohol per adult, and first in total revenue per gallon sold, according to published reports from the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. As citizens of Alabama do not drink as much, the agency receives more revenue per gallon of spirits sold. In this and several similar reports, control states (as opposed to licensure, or privatized, states) consistently rank highest in revenues and lowest in consumption among the 50 states. On average, consumption rates in control states are 14 percent less for spirits and 7 percent less for all alcohol products than privatized states, according to the Alcohol Research Group for the National Alcohol Beverage Control Association.

Other factors to consider include the following in non-control states with privatized alcohol sales:

- There is an increase in outlet density. Even if the proposed law limited outlet density, there would be an annual battle in the state Legislature with attempts to expand those outlet limitations. "Big alcohol" would be continually pushing for fewer restrictions and seeking to get legislators elected who would sympathize with their position.
- There are increased hours of sale. ABC stores have fixed hours of operation and are staffed by well-trained



GUEST NOTEBOOK
JOE GODFREY

employees. Once liquor sales are controlled by private retailers, you can expect them to remain open for longer hours. However, according to a published report in the December 2010 issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, longer hours of liquor sales results in an increase in motor vehicle crashes, as well as other related harmful results.

- There is an increase in advertising and promotion. Studies have shown that youth are especially susceptible to alcohol ads. According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, "the degree of youth alcohol advertising exposure is strongly and directly associated with intentions to drink, age of drinking onset, prevalence of drinking and the amount consumed."
- Studies have consistently concluded that a state-controlled alcohol distribution system such as the system Alabama has in place reduces the harms associated with alcohol abuse by promoting responsible distribution and consumption of alcohol.

Some legislators have argued that Alabama "needs to get out of the liquor business." What the citizens of Alabama need to understand is that the state is not in the liquor business, but it is in the alcohol beverage control business. Alcohol is not an ordinary commodity; it is the No. 1 abused drug in the nation. Controlling an addictive drug, as alcohol is, has economic and social benefits that far outweigh any perceived financial savings that may or may not come to the state.

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