

Title: **Democrats ready to take gamble to fix state's roads**
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 Size: 75.48 square inch
 Charleston, SC Circulation: 110289



Democrats ready to take gamble to fix state's roads

BY THAD MOORE

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COLUMBIA — South Carolina's of millions of dollars a year needed to keep roadways from deteriorating further would come from casinos along the Grand

deteriorating roads could be free of potholes, its aging bridges rehabilitated. And it could be done without new taxes or an increase in the gas tax.

Rather, the hundreds

Strand in Myrtle Beach and legalizing betting on horse races in other parts of the state.

Please see **CASINOS**, Page A5

Poll



Do you think South Carolina

should legalize gambling to pay for roads? Go to **postandcourier.com/polls** to vote.

Dems ready to take gamble to fix roads

CASINOS, from A1

House Minority Leader Todd Rutherford and other Democrats are offering that as an alternative to Gov. Nikki Haley's and Republican lawmakers' transportation plans.

"In order to pay for South Carolina's roads, we need new money," Rutherford said. "Either we're going to raise people's taxes, or we're going to come up with new ideas."

Haley and Republicans have offered divergent plans for dealing with the state's \$1.5 billion-a-year shortfall in transportation funding. No bills have been introduced so far. The governor set out a three-part, all-or-nothing proposal that would phase in a 10-cents-a-gallon hike in the state gas tax in exchange for a gradual cut in the income tax and centralizing control of the Department of Transportation. Legislators are proposing raising the tax on wholesale fuel sales.

House Democrats' proposal, while not directly tied to im-

proving transportation, emulates nearly half the states in the nation struggling with the same dilemma as South Carolina — how to keep up with infrastructure needs without raising taxes?

Casinos have spread quickly, particularly throughout the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states. Casinos operate in Louisiana, Mississippi and South Florida, and some states have tribal casinos on Indian reservations, but the Southeast is the only region to have largely kept gambling out, said David Schwartz, who runs the University of Nevada-Las Vegas's Center for Gaming Research.

That's likely due to strong religious traditions in the South, according to Israel Posner, executive director of the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey's institute on gaming, hospitality and tourism.

Pennsylvania's first casino opened in 2007. Five years later, the state was getting \$1.5 billion a year from the heavily taxed

gambling industry, surpassing Nevada, home to Las Vegas and 250 casinos statewide. The money was used to reduce property taxes and promote tourism and economic development. New York's gaming revenues also rivaled Nevada, raising \$822.7 million for its schools.

Posner said Pennsylvania and New York reap windfalls from gambling because they take a large cut of the revenues. Pennsylvania gets more than half of the money dropped on slot machines.

To attract resort developers, South Carolina would likely need to keep tax rates lower, Posner said.

"The higher the tax rate, the less of an investment that you're going to see," Posner said. "In Nevada, you have these grand palaces that have come in because you have a low tax rate, same as Atlantic City. The low tax rate encouraged a lot of very significant investment."

Rutherford's bill doesn't specify a tax rate or how many casinos the state would allow. In-

stead, it would change the state's Constitution to let the General Assembly approve casinos and other gambling.

Even if Democrats could muster the necessary votes, legalized gambling would be a poor bet in South Carolina.

It would need to pass by two-thirds vote in both the House and Senate, then be approved by a majority of the state's voters. For that reason alone, the state Chamber of Commerce, which supports Haley's roads plan, doesn't see it as a viable option for fixing the state's transportation system.

It also doesn't have support from Myrtle Beach. The president of the Myrtle Beach area Chamber said in a statement that legalizing casinos was a "misguided" approach.

"It's been tried before, and it's failed before," Myrtle Beach Mayor John Rhodes has been quoted previously as saying.

Myrtle Beach civic leaders didn't even want bingo parlors, which were legalized in 2004,

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fearing they would harm the Grand Strand's family-friendly image.

Gambling isn't seen as a panacea by everyone. Critics say it dangles statistically unattainable riches in front of those least able to afford to part with their money or are unable to stop gambling no matter how much they lose.

Les Bernal, national director of Stop Predatory Gambling, which opposes state-sanctioned

gaming, including lotteries, said casinos do one thing—separate gamblers from their money.

"Casinos represent the ultimate budget gimmick," Bernal said. "All it's done is pushed off hard budget decisions."

Slot machines, in particular, are designed to keep gamblers playing and losing, Bernal said, exploiting primarily lower- and middle-class players.

The federal Department of Health and Human Services estimates that about 1.5 million

Americans have experienced pathological gambling and that two to four times more have had issues with problem gambling.

If South Carolina does allow casinos on its coast, it would be jumping in as the industry shifts from the traditional model of resorts in Las Vegas and Atlantic City, experts say.

Gambling's spread along the East Coast has made for casinos that are less vacation and weekend destinations than places to

stop for an hour or two. That's caused big problems for Atlantic City's casinos. A UNLV gaming research report found that between 2006 and 2014, revenue was nearly cut in half.

Posner said Atlantic City's woes should serve as a cautionary tale for states thinking about allowing gambling.

"Atlantic City shows no sign of reversing its current losing streak," UNLV's study concluded.



HARRAH'S CHEROKEE CASINO/AP

Harrah's Cherokee Casino in Cherokee, N.C., has a monopoly on casino gambling in the Carolinas, something Democrats in the South Carolina House want to change.

Title: **Address issues at DSS right away**

Author:

Size: 37.2 square inch

Rock Hill, SC Circulation: 34688

**Our view**

Address issues at DSS right away

We think Gov. Nikki Haley's pick to lead the state's Department of Social Services has the right idea in proposing a comprehensive review of operations at every DSS office in the state. But, if approved by the Legislature, she should act right away to address some pressing problems that already are well documented.

In one of what are likely to be several confirmation hearings, Susan Alford said she wants to visit each county, assess its needs and hear why caseworkers leave the agency. She told the Senate General Committee that caseload problems are closely associated to turnover, and she plans to address both by using her experience to probe the department's "ground game" at the county level.

During the daylong county meetings, Alford said she would meet with local law enforcement, solicitors, guardians and caseworkers. She especially hopes to get a sense of how each of the state's 46 counties is handling its responsibilities to care for children.

Alford, 60, appears to have the experience to tackle the job. She has been director of The Girls Center at Clemson University since 2007, a research hub for issues such as teen pregnancy and poor self-esteem. She also worked at the Department of Juvenile Justice for more than 12 years in various director roles and served as director of the state's probation and parole agency.

Alford would replace Lillian Koller, who resigned last year amid calls for her head from members of both parties. Haley was slow in realizing that Koller was in real trouble, attributing the criticism to election-year politics, but Koller resigned a day before the Senate was due to take up a no-confidence vote on her leadership.

Alford said making substantive changes at DSS could take years. She warned lawmakers not to start criticizing the agency if they don't see drastic improvements in the next year or two.

Certainly the agency's operation deserves an in-depth evaluation such as this. Alford no doubt is on the right track in trying to get at the root causes of high turnover rates. Once she's has identified why so many people leave the agency, she can begin to seek sensible remedies.

But Alford does not have to start from scratch on this effort. The Senate already has produced an improvement plan after a year's worth of bipartisan hearings investigating child deaths, excessive caseloads and turnover.

Among other things, the plan, released in October, calls for adding 221 child welfare positions this fiscal year.

Many of the agency's problems, especially regarding child welfare, have been common knowledge for years, in fact, decades. A federal class action lawsuit was filed Jan. 12 against Haley and DSS, saying a lack of health care

and other basic services is endangering children in the system.

The complaint alleges Haley and DSS are responsible for drastic foster home shortages, too many caseloads for workers and a failure to provide children with basic health care. The lawsuit also alleges that child maltreatment while in foster care is not adequately investigated, and inaccurate data masks a much higher rate of abuse and neglect than the state reports to the federal government.

Whatever the outcome of the lawsuit, it raises red flags. And in light of the seriousness of the allegations, action should be taken right away.

We hope Alford, if approved for the job, will find a reasonable balance between thoroughly investigating the agency's operations while also acting quickly to ensure that children in the system now are being well cared for. Children who aren't getting proper care can't afford to wait years for a change.

» Online**Your view**

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submit-letter](http://heraldonline.com/submit-letter)

In summary

A yearlong, in-depth investigation of DSS is warranted, but some problems need to be addressed now.

Title: **Haley's road plan creates two sets of losers**

Author:

Size: 13.79 square inch

Greenville, SC Circulation: 113473



Haley's road plan creates two sets of losers

Our governor calls her road repair proposal a "Win Win Win" plan.

No, Gov. Haley, your proposal is a "Win Lose Lose" plan. For higher income citizens and corporations, it is a "win." For lower income residents, it is a "lose." And for the condition of the state's roads, it is a "lose."

Consider a little basic math for a resident with one car who drives 15,000 miles a year and gets 20 miles to the gallon. He will pay 10 cents more for the 1,000 gallons he uses a year — an increase of \$100. If he is a higher income resident, making \$75,000 gross and \$50,000 taxable income a year, his tax rate will be 2 percent less — \$1,000 a year. So the net impact of Haley's plan on the higher income resident is \$900 *less* tax. A *win* for the high income resident!

On the other hand, a resident with \$25,000 gross and \$5,000 taxable income will pay the same for his 15,000 miles of driving — \$100 more. But his tax rate will never reach the level for any income tax saving. So the net impact of Haley's plan on the lower income resident is \$100 *more* tax. A *lose* for the low income resident!

For the state's road problem, I cannot figure out how collecting less combined tax produces more money

to fix our roads. A *lose* for the state!

They say figures don't lie, but liars sometimes figure. I leave it to the reader to say how our governor figures.

R. Frank Plaxco
Greenville

Title: **Haley talks about focus at DHEC**
 Author: By Sammy Fretwell The State sfretwell@thestate.com
 Size: 24.8 square inch
 Greenville, SC Circulation: 113473



Haley talks about focus at DHEC

By Sammy Fretwell

The State
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Gov. Nikki Haley says there are "a lot of things" she would like to see done at the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control if her choice to run the agency is confirmed by the state Senate.

During a news conference Thursday, Haley said she wants Eleanor Kitzman to focus on key health issues. She also suggested that Kitzman could help environmentalists and businesses make compromises similar to one they recently struck over dredging the port of Charleston.

"I don't want that to be a one-time thing," the Republican governor said, responding to questions about changes she'd like to see Kitzman make. "I'd like to see us do more of that. See more how we can pull those groups together to get more things done for South Carolina."

Conservationists and the state Ports Authority last month announced an agreement in which the authority would protect unspoiled, forested land near Charleston. In exchange, the S.C. Coastal Conservation League agreed not to challenge permits for dredging the port. The port needs deepening to accommodate larger ships.

When the deal was announced in January, many praised it as a way to help the environment without slowing down the port project through costly legal appeals.

Kitzman, a political ally of Haley's and former state insurance director, faces tough questioning before the Senate Medical Affairs Committee. Senators have voiced numerous concerns about Kitzman's qualifications to run DHEC since she has little known experience with health and the environment. Much of her professional background is in insurance.

Kitzman, a Texas native, has been hired by the agency in a temporary capacity until the confirmation process is completed. The DHEC job also has brought criticism from Democratic senators. Confirmation hearings aren't expected to begin until at least Feb. 19, when the committee's next meeting is scheduled.

Haley said Kitzman will be "very good about making sure that we are moving forward."

The governor said DHEC has made progress, including with its sometimes clunky, slow-moving environmental and health permitting system. Now, "I want us to get smarter," she said.

The governor said she wants Kitzman to work closely with hospital executives in dealing with diseases, such as Ebola and the measles. She also said DHEC needs to deal with hospital certification issues that are emerging. In addition, she wants Kitzman to continue looking for ways to cut down on the use of paper at DHEC.

Those are directives "she'll be amazing at," Haley said.

Title: **Lawmakers hear calls to change way SC elects judges**
 Author: By Jamie Self THE STATE
 Size: 89.12 square inch
 Greenville, SC Circulation: 113473



Lawmakers hear calls to change way SC elects judges

Some worry legislators wield too much influence

By Jamie Self

THE STATE

The day before S.C. lawmakers voted to elect judges last week, some received advice on the importance of letting the public know that legislators take that exclusive power seriously.

House Majority Leader Bruce Bannister of Greenville told fellow Republicans Tuesday morning to give "serious, thoughtful answers" if asked why they support a candidate.

Don't just respond with, "Well, I knew them in kindergarten," or something," he said.

The next day, lawmakers elected more than 20 judges, including deciding a contentious judicial race between a

lawmaker's spouse and a 16-year incumbent.

That race drew cries of nepotism from Gov. Nikki Haley. It also relaunched a debate among lawmakers about whether S.C. law needed to be changed to avoid conflicts of interest — whether real or perceived.

Advocates of changing that system say Wednesday's judicial controversy is just one of several examples of why South Carolina should end lawmakers'

exclusive authority over nominating and electing judges.

They note:

» Legislators' spouses have run before and won posts, putting everyone involved in uncomfortable situations.

» The independence of S.C. courts has been questioned, given the way the General Assembly picks judges and sets their budgets. That system has judges, elected by legislators, ruling on the laws

made by those same legislators, who will decide if those judges stay in office.

But advocates of the current system say other options for electing judges could be worse, turning judicial elections into fund-raising contests or giving the governor too much power.

One branch controlling another

The way South Carolina conducts elects judges is rare.

Virginia is the only other state where legislators control the nomination and election of judges.

Lawmakers should share that power with the public or the governor to create checks and balances, some say.

"We don't need one branch of govern-

ment basically controlling everything about another branch of government," said Lynn Teague with the League of Women Voters.

But even as lawmakers debate ethics-related legislation, a 2-year-old effort to tighten the rules on legislators' activities, only a small chorus of lawmakers is talking about changing the way judges are elected.

Their proposals lack consensus on whether lawmakers should give up nominating or electing judges — or both.

In defense of the how lawmakers now pick judges, some say South Carolina's system could be worse.

The public could elect judges in partisan races "where judicial candidates have to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for political campaigns and run as Republicans or Democrats," said Tyler Jones, a House Democratic Caucus spokesman who says the state's current process is much better.

He's not alone in that concern about even more politicization of the judiciary.

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JUDGES

Continued from Page 3A

"The politics of the next popular election and who contributed money should not come into play as a factor" in a judge's decision, said state Sen. Chip Campsen, R-Charleston.

Politics at play

Some lawmakers were repelled by the negative politics that they said were at play in Wednesday's judicial election between Bill Funderburk of

Camden and 16-year-incumbent Carolyn Matthews of Columbia.

The revulsion was so extreme that about two dozen lawmakers, who had voted in another competitive race just minutes before, either did not vote for Funderburk or Matthews or voted "present" in protest.

Gov. Haley also weighed in, posting the vote on Facebook and calling out lawmakers who

backed Funderburk, accusing them of supporting nepotism.

The political back-and-forth continued Friday.

House Minority Leader Todd Rutherford, D-Richland, accused Republican Haley of seeking "political payback" against Democratic Rep. Funderburk of Camden.

In 2012, Funderburk was the only member of the House Ethics Committee who did not want to dismiss a complaint that

Haley had violated state ethics laws by failing to disclose her work as a consultant for a Columbia engineering firm. Funderburk also was the panel's only Democrat.

Rutherford also noted Haley, too, cast a vote that helped the spouse of a lawmaker become a judge.

Haley press secretary Chaney Adams, in turn, accused Rutherford of mudslinging, adding Ha-

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 Greenville, SC Circulation: 113473

ley gladly would join both parties in an effort to ban state lawmakers "from appointing their spouses as judges."

'They know my Aunt May'

State Sen. Larry Martin, the Pickens Republican who is head of the Senate Judiciary Committee, already is pushing a proposal that would ban the spouses of legislators from running for judge.

Sen. Campsen says he would like to dial back the political influence on lawmakers by giving them more time to consider candidates.

Candidates must wait 48 hours after the Judicial Merit Selection Commission releases its list of nominees to ask lawmakers for their support.

Now, lawmakers seldom have time to review the nominees and the selection commission's report on their qualifications — usually released on a Thursday at noon — before candidates start asking legislators their vote the following Tuesday, Campsen said.

Sometimes judicial races are decided that first day that legislators are back in Columbia for their three-day work week, long before election day in the General Assembly.

"You fire the gun, and the race is over," Campsen said. "It's supposed to

be a 5-K (race), but, instead, it's a 4-yard dash."

Campsen also said his proposal would encourage lawmakers to put in more thought before they pledge to vote for candidates.

Sometimes lawmakers choose candidates who live near them, go to their Rotary Club or "know (their) Aunt May," he said.

'Almost impossible' to avoid conflicts

At least five other bills introduced in the House and Senate this year seek to change the way lawmakers nominate and elect judges.

Two proposals would remove lawmakers from the process of nominating judges, while allowing them still to elect them.

Under one of Martin's proposals, the governor would renominate the incumbent or nominate three candidates who would face an election in the General Assembly.

Another Senate proposal, by Tom Corbin, R-Greenville, would remove lawmakers from the screening process, replacing them with members of the public, who would be nominated by lawmakers and appointed by the governor.

The governor would pick a chairman from the public members of the judicial screening panel.

Teague said the League of Women Voters would

support members of the public controlling the screening process for judges — a move that would curb suspicion that lawmakers were favoring candidates with ties to them.

"There's nothing unethical about anybody running because they're married to a legislator," Teague said, referring to Wednesday's race where Rep. Funderburk's husband defeated incumbent Matthews, 87-50.

"The question is: How do you evaluate whether extra influence is brought to bear?"

In a small state like South Carolina, where lawmakers "wouldn't have been elected if they didn't have ties with others," it is "almost impossible" to expect judicial candidates — or candidates for other legislative appointments — not to know someone in the Legislature, she added.

Politics or one of 170?

Three other bills would end altogether the process of lawmakers electing and nominating judges.

Sen. Lee Bright, R-Spartanburg, and three House Republicans have filed bills that would allow the governor to nominate judges.

Lawmakers would confirm the governor's appointees through a formal screening process and could reject nomi-

nees.

State Sen. Tom Davis, R-Beaufort, supports having the governor nominate judges — and having lawmakers confirm them. Doing so would lead to higher-quality judges who are more independent from the legislative branch, he said.

Davis said politics now drags down the process of legislators electing judges, leading, as it did in Wednesday's race, to a limited discussion on the "pros and cons based on (the candidates') merits."

S.C. Attorney General Alan Wilson, R-Lexington, also strongly supports changing the way the judges are elected to include the executive and legislative branches of government, he said in an email Friday.

"The current method omits any involvement by the executive (branch, meaning the governor)," Wilson wrote. "We greatly need the participation of both the executive and legislative branches in this process. Full participation by all branches of government works best."

Letting the governor choose judges for lawmakers to vet and approve would ensure South Carolinians know who to hold accountable for judicial conduct, said Ashley Landess, president of the S.C. Policy Council, a limited-government think tank.



Title: **Model for SC gun law has mixed reviews**
 Author: By Tim Smith Staff writer tcsmith@greenvillenews.com
 Size: 100.13 square inch
 Greenville, SC Circulation: 113473

● **USA TODAY** UNITED STATES WILL SEND MORE AID TO UKRAINE, KERRY SAYS **PAGE 1B**

Model for SC gun law has mixed reviews

Louisiana passed a similar gun-control bill last year

By Tim Smith

Staff writer

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COLUMBIA—The Louisiana law aimed at removing guns from those convicted of domestic violence and copied in a South Carolina bill headed to the Senate floor has had little impact since its passage last year, according to some defense lawyers and prosecutors in that state.

In fact, some prosecutors told *The Greenville News*, domestic violence cases have actually increased. And some problems have surfaced with the law, such as a lack of a uniform method for removing the guns from their owners and the failure of some convictions to make it

onto a federal database used for background checks used for firearms purchases.

But a Louisiana advocate for domestic violence victims said she believes the law has already prevented violence.

And Sen. Larry Martin, a Pickens Republican who is chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and is shepherding the bill through the South Carolina Senate, said he does not believe there has been enough time to determine the Louisiana law's impact.

"Will it eliminate it? No, I'll concede that," he said of the pending bill. "But I

think in light of where we are, chronically among the highest in the nation, we definitely owe it to the victims of domestic violence to try this."

The gun law bans gun possession for 10 years for those convicted of criminal domestic violence and also prohibits possession for those who are subject to protective orders.

Louisiana's legislature passed its law last May, part of a series of laws aimed at reducing domestic violence. The gun

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GUN

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provision in the South Carolina bill also is part of a package of reforms that include separating the crime into degrees, providing penalties for each and establishing procedures for the issuance of permanent, civil, no-contact orders in domestic violence cases.

The two states mirror each other in many ways.

Both are predominantly rural Southern states with similar sized populations, a love of hunting, and a citizenry zealous about the Second Amendment. Louisiana voters, in fact, amended their state constitution in 2012 to require "strict scrutiny" of any restrictions on the right to bear arms. Judges, when asked, are required under the amendment to determine if a gun law demonstrates a "compelling govern-

mental interest" and is narrowly defined. One judge did that in 2013, striking down a law banning felons from possessing firearms.

Louisiana and South Carolina also have a significant problem with domestic violence.

"We mirror South Carolina very closely," said Beth Meeks, executive director of the Louisiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence. "We frequently lead the nation, meaning we're almost always ranked in the top five in murders of women."

Last year, after a grisly murder of family members in which the offender shot and killed himself, Louisiana lawmakers passed a package aimed at reducing the carnage.

The new laws require that anyone convicted of domestic abuse battery be prohibited from a concealed weapons permit or

possessing a firearm for 10 years after the completion of the offender's parole, probation or suspended sentence.

It also forbids those subject to permanent injunctions or protective orders from possessing a firearm when the order finds that the person is a "credible threat" to the physical safety of a family or household member and the order informs the person he or she is prohibited from possessing a firearm.

Those violating either provision are guilty of a felony and face a maximum sentence of five years in prison and a fine of \$1,000.

Other new provisions mandate that courts upload protective orders to a state registry, create court-monitored domestic violence intervention programs that offenders must take, forbid those

charged with domestic battery from being released from jail on a personal recognizance bond, make second convictions a felony and require those convicted of domestic abuse aggravated assault to serve 85 percent of their sentences.

John "Schuyler" Marvin, is the chief prosecutor for two northern Louisiana parishes.

He said when it comes time to talk about an offender's plea, defense lawyers try to avoid a domestic violence plea because the state is full of hunters and firearms are cherished.

"They don't mind pleading guilty to simple battery," he said, "because they don't want to lose their gun rights. That's a big reason why we struggle to get guilty pleas in domestic violations."

He said the new law

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"hasn't made my job any easier."

Marvin said he isn't aware of any instances in which someone convicted of domestic violence or subject to a restraining order has been denied purchase of a firearm.

He said he has a special prosecutor assigned to domestic violence cases.

"And his caseload hasn't gone down at all," he said. "If anything, it's gone up."

Melanie Fields, a domestic violence special prosecutor in Baton Rouge, agrees that cases have not gone down.

"In our jurisdiction, we have not seen any reduction in domestic violence cases, with the exception of murders," she said. "We've had a significant reduction in murders but not since that law, just in general."

She said her area has seen a slight reduction in violent crime in general recently but that drop has not transferred to domestic violence.

"That's the only crime that has either been steady or seen a slight increase," she said, attributing any increase to better awareness and conversations in state and national media about the issue.

She said people had predicted it would be tough to separate guns from offenders because Louisiana is such a big hunting state.

She said she can understand the pressure to plea bargain in some jurisdictions when prosecutors have 500 cases to move and the victim in a domestic violence case may have reunited with the of-

fender.

"But that isn't the way, as prosecutors, we're trying to educate the prosecution or defense bar," she said. "The idea is victim safety and what is the right thing to do. Nobody wants to stop people from hunting if that's OK."

"I'm not against hunting or guns. I am against putting guns in the hands of people who are abusers and might pick up that gun later down the road if the relationship is going to escalate."

She said she doesn't think the law has had any impact yet but it may still be too early to judge.

Fields said one issue that is unresolved is how offenders are to give up their guns. The law does not address any mechanism, she said, and while some law enforcement agencies in smaller jurisdictions allow offenders to deposit their firearms with them, others do not have the storage capacity and it's left to the offender to figure out.

"That truly is a problem," she said. "It depends on the jurisdiction you talk to."

Steve Moore, a Baton Rouge defense lawyer, said he is not sure what impact the law has had.

"Every one of my clients, even before the Louisiana law was enacted, was instructed never to have a firearm because it violated the federal law," he said. "To me, from my understanding of my clients, even though the law has changed in Louisiana, it's been the same."

Andre Belanger, a Baton Rouge defense lawyer and former domestic vio-

lence prosecutor, said it was already common that those seeking bail in a domestic violence case be prohibited from possessing firearms. He said if people want to commit a crime, they will, no matter what laws are passed.

"If someone wants to possess a firearm to commit a crime, they can do so," he said. "I think if someone is dead-set on doing harm to somebody, they'll find a weapon."

Meeks said she believes the law already has had some impact in one area where deputies have used it to seize weapons from "very dangerous offenders."

"That probably has been invaluable in preventing a number of homicides," she said. "When a person has escalated and they have a weapon in their presence, we know that battered women are five times more likely to be killed under those circumstances."

She said it's hard to quantify any impact from the law because there is no central data base tracking of such charges, some people are charged in domestic violence situations with other types of crimes and some jurisdictions report domestic violence crimes differently. She said her agency is working on an analysis of domestic homicides.

Even if the data was available, she said, it would be too soon to see if there has been a decrease in domestic homicides since the law was enacted.

She said there has been discussion since the law went into effect about possible improvements in the new law, including a uni-

form system for the gun surrender process and better reporting of data to the federal database for firearms background checks.

Meeks said there is some confusion about who should report convictions to the federal database and when it should be reported.

"Our system is a little foggy and we are trying to sort that out," she said. "We know the federal background check is important and it's popular, with more than 85 percent of Americans supporting it, so we should make sure it works."

She suggests that South Carolina legislators also apply the gun ban to those convicted of stalking and sexual assault, since such assaults are sometimes family crimes.

Martin said the South Carolina bill is the first step in a series of reforms that is likely to continue with the formation of a task force appointed by Gov. Nikki Haley.

"They don't mind pleading guilty to simple battery, because they don't want to lose their gun rights. That's a big reason why we struggle to get guilty pleas in domestic violations."

JOHN "SCHUYLER" MARVIN
 Louisiana prosecutor



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News
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School choice proponents rally at the Statehouse

COLUMBIA — Hundreds of students celebrated South Carolina's school choice options with a rally on the Statehouse steps.

The event Tuesday coincided with National School Choice Week. Students from across the state marched a block from a hotel to the Statehouse.

Gov. Nikki Haley briefly addressed the crowd and read a ▲

proclamation declaring it South Carolina School Choice Week.

South Carolina's educational options include public charter, magnet and online schools.

School choice proponents hope to expand on the state's scholarship program for students with special needs.



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Drilling off Carolinas coast plan draws applause, criticism

From Associated Press reports

CHARLESTON — Lawmakers generally applauded while conservation groups worried Tuesday when the Obama administration included tracts off the coast of the Carolinas in a draft proposal of areas that could be opened to oil and gas exploration later this decade.

Politicians generally said such exploration would boost state economies and help the nation toward energy independence.

Conservationists worried that oil spills could damage the thriving coastal tourism of the Carolinas and said the focus should be on developing offshore wind energy.

The plan floated by the Obama administration would for the first time open up a broad swath of the Atlantic Coast to drilling, even as it moved to restrict drilling indefinitely in environmentally sensitive areas off

Alaska.

The proposal envisions auctioning areas located more than 50 miles off Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia

to oil companies no earlier than 2021, long after President Barack Obama leaves office. For decades, oil companies have been barred from drilling in the Atlantic Ocean, where a moratorium was in place up until 2008.

The plan also calls for leasing 10 areas in the Gulf of Mexico, long the epicenter of U.S. offshore oil production, and three

off the Alaska coast.

"This is a balanced proposal that would make available nearly 80 percent of the undiscovered technically recoverable resources, while protecting areas that are simply too special to develop," Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said in a conference call

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with reporters. "The areas off the table are very small in comparison to areas on the table."

The plan, which covers potential lease sales in the 2017-22 time frame, drew immediate reaction from Capitol Hill, where Sen.



Murkowski

Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, called it a war on her home state, and where Northeastern Democrats objected to the proposal for the Atlantic Ocean, saying an oil spill knows no boundaries. The proposal comes as the U.S. is in the midst of an oil boom and when oil prices, and pump prices, are at near-historic lows.

"Opening up the Atlantic coast to drill for fossil fuel is unnecessary, poses a serious threat to coastal communities throughout the region, and is the wrong approach to energy development in this country," said New Jersey Sens. Cory Booker and Robert Menendez, and Rep. Frank Pallone, in a statement.

But many politicians from Southeastern states support offshore drilling, and had lobbied the administration to open federal waters off their coasts.

"Exploring for energy off the coast is a critical economic development issue," said South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, a Republican. "It will mean jobs and investment for our state,



Haley

and, while we will always make safeguarding our rich natural resources a priority, it's encouraging to see the federal government finally acknowledge what we've been fighting for with our federal delegation for years."

U.S. Rep. Jeff Duncan, a Republican from South Carolina, agreed with the idea of drilling off shore.

"This is a potential game changer for South Carolina, and another important step toward making offshore production a

reality," Duncan said.

U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican, also applauded the idea of drilling.

"It's long past time for America to start realizing its full energy potential and economic benefits from the vast untapped energy reserves off our shores," Tillis said in an article appearing in The Greenville Daily Reflec-



Tillis





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tor hours before the announcement.

Environmentalists had a different view.

"For me this is a very disappointing development," said Chris DeScherer of the Southern Environmental Law Center. "It jeopardizes what makes our region of the country special. We want beach balls on our beaches, not tar balls."

Dustin Chicurel-Bayard

of the North Carolina Chapter of the Sierra Club called for developing other energy sources.

"As the administration moves to finalize this proposal we hope they will recognize that North Carolina and South Carolina's energy future should be focused on tapping our region's large offshore wind potential instead of drilling for fossil

fuels," he said.

"I'm not surprised by the announcement," said Hamilton Davis of the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League.

"But it's time for folks to start paying attention. I think we'll see the people of South Carolina and the other states speak up and we'll see the federal government respond accordingly."



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148 SC House group passes its road plan

Panel chairman expects changes

BY JEFFREY COLLINS
The Associated Press

COLUMBIA — A House committee that has been studying how to fix South Carolina's deteriorating roads for four months passed several recommendations Tuesday, including lowering the gas tax and adding a sales tax on fuel and turning over thousands of miles of state roads to counties.

But the committee's chairman, Rep. Gary Simrill, said he knows his group of lawmakers only took the first step down a long path as officials from Gov. Nikki Haley down to county councils try to have their say on how to improve the state's roads.

Even this group didn't reach a consensus. Democrats worried the plan doesn't raise

enough money and poorer counties will be left behind as roads get turned over to them without the money or equipment to maintain them.

Simrill's committee recommended lowering South Carolina's gas tax by 6 cents to 10.75 cents and placing a 6 percent sales tax on fuel. That should raise at least \$400 million, the amount of extra money Department of Transportation Director Janet Oakley said her agency needs to keep roads as they are and assure the system doesn't get worse, said Simrill, R-Rock Hill.

DOT has previously said it would cost \$1.5 billion a year to get all state roads to good condition by 2040.

Other proposals approved by the committee would have the governor appoint members of the DOT board, revamp a special bank that loans out tens and hundreds of million dollars for big projects, and turn over 15,000 miles of short, lightly traveled state roads over to counties along with a promise to send along part of the gas tax and extra money to pay to upkeep those roads.

Democratic Rep. Russell Ott said places like Calhoun County, where he is from, don't have the equipment needed to maintain roads or mow the grass. He also questioned if an extra \$400 million a year is enough, since many of the state's roads are already in bad condition.

"I've talked to people in my district, and they aren't interested in keeping our roads the way they are right now," Ott said.

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Roads

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A bill will now be written and go to a subcommittee, the House Ways and Means Committee and then on to the House floor. Senators will likely come up with their own plan, and if lawmakers from both bodies agree, the governor can sign or veto any road-funding bill that passes.

In her State of the State address last week, Haley suggested raising the state's gas tax by 10 cents as long as South Carolina's top income tax bracket is cut by 2 percentage points. She said she must get the tax cut for any bill to get her approval.

"The governor respects

the good work of the committee, but thinks a straight-out tax increase is not the best way to go. She remains confident that a meeting of the minds will take place to both address our roads needs and help our economic competitiveness," Haley spokeswoman Chaney Adams said.

Ott, who was elected to the House in 2013, voted in favor of the committee's recommendations because he felt like it was a good first step. But he said he expects the final plan will be different.

"As I am learning slowly but surely, things rarely look in the end the way they look in the beginning," Ott said.



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¹⁴⁸ SC employment sets record for Dec.

From staff reports

COLUMBIA—The South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce reported Tuesday that the state hit a record of more than 2 million people working in December.

The state's unemployment rate went down 0.2 percent from November. The nationwide rate also fell the same percentage from 5.8 percent to 5.6 in December.

The Florence Metropolitan

Statistical Area December unemployment rate of 7.1 percent was the lowest rate since 2006, which was 6.7 percent, and 2007, which was 6.3 percent.

Unemployment for the statistical area in December reached its highest level of more than 12 percent in 2009, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In the Pee Dee, Marion County remained at the top of the unemployment rate list in the state

at 11.9 percent. It was one of six counties in the state that saw an increase in December's not seasonally adjusted unemployment rate.

Horry County also saw an increase from 7.4 percent in No-

vember to 8.1 percent.

The state's labor force continued to expand with an increase of more than 4,400, which set another all-time high of 2,202,017.

The state's unemployment rate is the ratio of the total unem-

ployed to the total labor force.

"We have a record high number of South Carolinians working, a record high labor force and record high number of jobs in the Palmetto State," said Cheryl M. Stanton, executive director of the employment agency. "Now we need to focus on Success South Carolina, Gov. Haley's recently announced initiative that will prepare South Carolina workers for high-demand jobs and match job seek-

ers with the more than 60,000 currently open jobs."

Florence's unemployment rate dropped from 7.2 to 7.1 percent in December from November. Darlington county's rate dropped from 7.1 to 6.8 percent.

The areas of industry (nonagricultural employment seasonally adjusted) that recorded gains in December were the professional and business services area (up 3,300); construction (up 1,000); and manufacturing (up 800).