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State Senate to take up proposal on road repairs

CASSIE COPE

THE STATE

State senators will start debating a road-repair bill Tuesday, but deep divisions indicate they are nowhere near a deal.

State Sen. Ray Cleary, R-Georgetown, made a procedural move Thursday to set up debate on a road-repair proposal starting Tuesday.

To reach a deal, senators must agree on three sticking points — how much to increase the state's gas tax and driving fees, how much to cut the state's income tax and how to reform the Transportation Department.

"There's just a lot of people in a lot of different directions," said state Sen. Sean Bennett, R-Dorchester, one of the eight senators who met in an attempt to reach a compromise.

Gov. Nikki Haley's insistence on a huge tax cut as part of a roads bill makes a deal difficult, Democrats say.

Senators also remain divided on whether to give up legislative control of the state Transportation Department. "There's no roads bill without reform," said state Sen. Larry Grooms, R-Berkeley, who chairs the Senate Transportation Committee.

Meanwhile, a senator who filibustered a roads proposal last spring says a gas-tax hike is likely unnecessary.

How much to cut taxes?

State Sen. Vincent Sheheen, D-Kershaw, blames Republicans for the Senate's deadlock, saying they are pushing for a tax break for the wealthy.

Haley said earlier this week she will not sign legislation that raises the gas tax by 10 cents a gallon unless an offsetting income tax cut is included.

Haley has proposed an income tax cut five times larger than the amount the

added gas tax would raise. Under her plan, the average taxpayer would get a \$623 tax break, according to 2015 estimates. However, an estimated 1.1 million S.C. residents, who would pay higher gas taxes, would not get a tax break because they do not make enough to pay income taxes. Meanwhile, the wealthiest 379 S.C. taxpayers would see their income taxes cut by \$145,784 each.

If Haley withdrew her promise to veto any roads bill that does not include a tax cut, senators would have a better chance of reaching a deal, said state Sen. Darrell Jackson, D-Richland.

Who should control roads agency?

Many senators also have firmly held positions on whether the Legislature or governor should control the Transportation Department commission that oversees the state's roads agency, said state Sen. Shane Massey, R-Edgefield.

Legislators now control that commission.

However, on Wednesday, the Senate Transportation Committee refused to advance a proposal to allow the governor to appoint the roads commission, sending it back to a subcommittee for more debate.

That proposal will be debated next week, said Grooms, who chairs the transportation panel. Grooms, who unsuccessfully pushed for gubernatorial appointments in 2007, said he sees an opportunity now to give the governor control of the roads agency.

Necessary to raise the gas tax?

State Sen. Tom Davis, the Beaufort Republican who blocked a road-repair proposal last spring, said Thursday he

will push to reform the Transportation Department and abolish the S.C. Transportation Infrastructure Bank, which borrows money for roads.

Davis also wants money for road repairs to come from the added \$1.2 billion that lawmakers have to spend in the state budget, instead of hiking the gas tax.

Other senators argue money is needed to pay for other needs, including flood relief. More money for rebuilding rural schools, increased state health-care costs and higher education needs also must come from that extra \$1.2 billion, said state Sen. Joel Lourie, D-Richland.

Lourie said some of the added money can be used for roads. But, he added, that will not solve the state's long-term road-funding needs, estimated at an additional \$400 million to \$1 billion a year for the next 20-plus years.

One step forward, two back

The willingness of senators to debate the road-repair bill, passed last year by the House, shows there is a serious desire to get something done, said Bill Ross of the S.C. Alliance to Fix Our Roads.

State Sen. Wes Hayes, R-York, said senators in the eight-member group worked in good faith.

Cleary, a co-chair of the working group, said the senators involved threw "mud at the wall to see if anything sticks."

Massey said the working-group senators made more progress in five days this year than they did in all of last year. That's because senators were talking with one another, he said. But, he added, they remain far apart.

"We take one step forward and two steps backward," said Jackson, another member of the group.



Title: **Haley makes strong statement on ethics**

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THE GREENVILLE NEWS EDITORIAL

Haley makes strong statement on ethics

Agree or disagree with her tactics, Gov. Nikki Haley on Wednesday night made a strong statement about the need for South Carolina lawmakers, particularly senators, to finally pass meaningful ethics reform in 2016.

In the middle of her State of the State address, Haley asked senators to show their support greater ethical accountability.

Haley justifiably expressed exasperation over the Senate's continuing failure to pass meaningful ethics reform. "Last year I told you I didn't know what else to say about ethics reform," she said. "Yet here we are again."

She listed the two main priorities as requiring public officials to disclose the sources of their income, and having independent investigations of legislators rather than having legislators investigate their own colleagues.

She then asked senators to stand if they supported each of these issues. She closed that portion of her address by saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, we finally got to see what that vote might look like."

"I hope that this will be the last year we talk about ethics reform."

Amen.

These are meaningful reforms that this newspaper has repeatedly endorsed, and does again.

Yes, there is a reasonable argument that the State of the State is not the proper venue for political grandstanding and that Haley was out of line to use this tactic.

But there's a stronger and more compelling argument –

bolstered by the number of ethical problems elected officials in this state have faced in recent years – that justifies Haley using this forum to call out lawmakers who have repeatedly refused to pass ethics reform that is perfectly reasonable and offers real protections to the people who put those lawmakers in office, pay their salaries and rely on their integrity.

So we, too, hope that this will be the last year we need to talk about ethics reform in South Carolina.

In an echo to her speech last week responding to President Barack Obama's State of the Union address, Haley talked about the need for civility among lawmakers and all South Carolina citizens. She did it under the shadow of the death of Sen. Clementa Pinckney, who was among the nine shot dead at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston last summer.

Calling for more unity, she invoked the spirit of Pinckney who, she said, "never seemed to speak against anyone or anything but, instead, to advocate for the people and the ideas that he believed in."

She went on, "The building we sit in invites disagreement. That is a good thing, a healthy thing – we should not pretend to all believe the same things nor should we be silent about where and when we differ."

"But disagreement does not have to mean division. Honest policy differences do not need to morph into personal dislike, distrust, and disillusion."

In her new role as a conscience for the Republican Party,

as a voice of reason in politics, Haley is saying all the right things. Her words on Wednesday could help set the right tone for debate in the Statehouse and for discourse on the campaign trail in 2016. She should be commended for saying these things and we hope she and other political leaders follow her words with sincerity in their actions.

Finally, Haley touched on successes of the past year: Reforms to help fight domestic violence, an issue that demands addressing in this state; she acknowledged that ending domestic violence in the deadliest state in America for women who are abused will require nothing short of a culture change. She talked about changes in the school funding formula and the need to press for more reform to ensure that educational opportunities throughout South Carolina are equitable.

And she talked about the difficulties South Carolinians faced together in the past 12 months and how all of it has and should make us stronger as we move ahead.

The last words belong to Haley who hit many high notes on Wednesday night, captured the spirit of our state, and threw down the gauntlet before the General Assembly when needed:

"There is a greatness in South Carolina, a greatness embodied by our people, a greatness unequaled in our country. ... It is my fervent wish that, in this year, we, as the representatives of those people, act in a manner that is worthy of that greatness."



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¹⁴⁸ D&W adding 60 jobs in Fountain Inn

D&W Fine Pack (D&W), a Mid Oaks Investment portfolio company, is expanding its manufacturing operations in Laurens County. The company's \$20 million investment is expected to create 60 new jobs in Fountain Inn over the next five years.

In an effort to meet increased customer demand, D&W is investing in equipment and machinery upgrades at its 650,000-square-foot Laurens County facility, which is located at 1372 N. Old Laurens Road in Fountain Inn. Hiring for the new positions is expected to begin in the summer of 2016.

"With the company's long history of leadership and success in the industry and its most recent expansion at the Fountain Inn location, D&W Fine Pack remains committed to investing in the latest innovations, skilled employees and business partnerships that will not only strengthen its competitive advantage in the marketplace, but help generate new opportunities for

employment, economic development and community relationships within the area," SAID D&W Fine Pack President and CEO Kevin Andrews.

"It is always good news when an existing industry expands in Laurens County. It shows they believe in us and their future," said Laurens County Council Chairman Joe Wood.

"D&W Fine Pack's continued growth proves that we are doing the right things to make Laurens County a great place to do business. We are excited about the growth and wish them much success in the years to come," said Laurens County Development Corporation Chairman Stan Bryson.

Gov. Nikki Haley said, "South Carolina's manufacturing industry is growing so quickly

because the people who make up our world-class workforce have proven to the world that they can do any job that is asked of them, and do it well. This \$20 million

investment from D&W, and the 60 new jobs it will create in Laurens County, is a reason to celebrate in every part of South Carolina."

"We're excited to start the new year by celebrating the continued success of our state's thriving manufacturing industry. D&W Fine Pack's investment and the 60 new jobs it will bring to Laurens County is a big win and will have a real impact on the people of this state," said Secretary of Commerce Bobby Hitt

Established in 2010 and headquartered in Illinois, D&W manufactures a wide range of products for the foodservice and food packaging industries. With facilities in California, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan and Nebraska, the company employs more than 1,700 workers across the U.S. For more information on the company, visit www.dwfinepack.com.



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148 Obama warns against giving into election year cynicism

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Eyeing the end of his presidency, Barack Obama urged Americans Tuesday night to rekindle their belief in the promise of change that first carried him to the White House, declaring that the country must not allow election-year fear and division to put economic and security progress at risk.

“All the talk of America’s economic decline is political hot air,” Obama said in his final State of the Union address. “So is all the rhetoric you hear about our enemies getting stronger and America getting weaker.”

“The United States of America is the most powerful nation on Earth. Period. It’s not even close,” he said.

The president’s address to lawmakers and a prime-time television audience was meant to both shape his legacy and put his imprint squarely on the race to succeed him. He defended his record — and implicitly urged the public to elect another Democratic president to build on it — but acknowledged the persistent anxieties of Americans who feel shut out of a changing economy or at risk from an evolving terror threat.

While Obama did not directly call out Republicans, he sharply, and at times sarcastically, struck back at rivals who have challenged his economic and national security stewardship.

In his most pointed swipe at the GOP candidates running to succeed him, Obama warned against “voices urging us to fall back into tribes, to scapegoat fellow citizens who don’t look like us or pray like us or vote like we do or share the same background.”

His words were unexpectedly echoed by South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, who was selected to give the Republican response to Obama’s address. Underscoring how the heated campaign rhetoric about immigrants and

minorities from GOP front-runner Donald Trump in particular has unnerved some Republican leaders, Haley called on Americans to resist the temptation “to follow the siren call of the angriest voices.”

Focused on his own legacy, Obama ticked off a retrospective of his domestic and foreign policy actions in office, including helping lead the economy back from the brink of depression, taking aggressive action on climate change and ending a Cold War freeze with Cuba.

He touted implementation of the landmark nuclear deal with Iran, but made no mention of the 10 American sailors picked up by Iran Tuesday. The Pentagon said the sailors had drifted into Iranian waters after encountering mechanical problems and would be returned safely and promptly.

Tackling one of the most vexing foreign policy challenges of his presidency, Obama vowed a robust campaign to “take out” the Islamic State group, but chastised Republicans for “over the top claims” about the extremist group’s power.

“Masses of fighters on the back of pickup trucks and twisted souls plotting in apartments or garages pose an enormous danger and must be stopped,” he said. “But they do not threaten our national security.”

The president’s words were unlikely to satisfy Republicans, as well as some Democrats, who say he underestimates the Islamic State’s power and is leaving the U.S. vulnerable to attacks at home.

Obama was frank about one of his biggest regrets: failing to ease the persistently deep divisions between Democrats and Republicans.

“The rancor and suspicion between the parties has gotten worse instead of better,” he conceded. “There’s no doubt a president with the gifts of Lincoln or Roosevelt might have better

bridged the divide, and I guarantee I’ll keep trying to be better so long as I hold this office.”

He specifically called for ending the gerrymandering of some congressional districts that gives parties an iron grip on House seats. He also urged steps to make voting easier and reduce the influence of money in politics.

Mindful of the scant prospect for major legislative action in an election year, Obama avoided the traditional litany of policy proposals. He did reiterate his call for working with Republicans on criminal justice reform and finalizing an Asia-Pacific trade pact, and he also vowed to keep pushing for action on politically fraught issues such as curbing gun violence and fixing the nation’s fractured immigration laws.

Yet Obama was eager to look beyond his own presidency, casting the actions he’s taken as a springboard for future economic progress and national security. His optimism was meant to draw a contrast with what the White House sees as doom-and-gloom scenarios peddled by the GOP.

Republicans were largely dismissive of the president’s address. House Speaker Paul Ryan, assuming the speaker’s traditional seat behind the president for the first time, say Obama’s “lofty platitudes and nostalgic rhetoric may make for nice soundbites, but they don’t explain how to” solve problems.

Tuesday’s address was one of Obama’s last opportunities to claim a large television audience as president. However, the State of the Union has suffered a major drop-off in viewers in recent years. Last year, Obama’s speech reached 31.7 million viewers, according to Nielson, down from 52 million for his first State of the Union and 62 million for George W. Bush in 2003.



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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Barack Obama delivers his State of the Union address Tuesday before a joint session of Congress on Capitol Hill in Washington.



First Lady Michelle Obama sits next to a vacant seat to honor victims of gun violence during President Barack Obama's State of the Union address on Capitol Hill in Washington. Also present are Connecticut Gov. Dannel Malloy (left) and Army veteran Naveed Shah (right) with (second row, from left) activist Ryan Reyes, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, community college student Jennifer Bragdon and Air Force Staff Sgt. Spencer Stone.

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148 In GOP response to Obama, SC governor defends immigrants

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Americans should resist “the siren call of the angriest voices” in how the nation treats immigrants, South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley said as the GOP used its response to President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address to try softening the tough stance embraced by some of its leading presidential candidates.

Haley, herself the U.S.-born daughter of Indian immigrants, said Tuesday that the country is facing its most dangerous security threat since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. That was a reference to the Islamic State group, which has taken credit for attacks in Paris and elsewhere and may have inspired last month’s mass shooting in San Bernardino, California.

“During anxious times, it can be tempting to follow the siren call of the angriest voices,” she said in excerpts of her party’s formal response, which was released early by Republicans. “We must resist that temptation.”

Haley, who has been mentioned by some as a potential GOP vice presidential candidate this year, has risen in national prominence for helping to end the display of the Confederate battle flag on Statehouse grounds last year after half a century. She also gained attention following last June’s slaying of nine people at a historically black church in Charleston, South Carolina, and catastrophic flooding that battered her state in October.

The nation’s youngest governor at 43, Haley said no one who works hard and

follows the laws “should ever feel unwelcome in this country.”

In the excerpts, Haley did not mention the GOP presidential race. But the front-runner so far, Donald Trump, has called for deporting millions of immigrants in the U.S. illegally. Two other contenders, Sens. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Ted Cruz, R-Texas, have battled over which of them has the tougher record on the issue.

Polls have shown public concerns over terrorism and national security have become a top issue ever since the November attacks that killed 130 in Paris and the December mass shooting by a radicalized Muslim couple that killed 14 people in San Bernardino. Ever since, Republicans on the presidential campaign trail and in Congress have been emphasizing the issues.

“This president appears either unwilling or unable to deal with” the terrorist threat, Haley said in remarks that broadly described how Republicans would do things differently than Democrats if they win the White House and retain control of Congress. “Soon, the Obama presidency will end and America will have the chance to turn in a new direction.”

At the same time, many in the GOP feel the party must do a better job of appealing to Hispanics and other minority voters if they are to compete effectively in national and many statewide elections. Some feel that Trump is so divisive that he could not only lose the presidential election if nominated but cost the GOP seats in Congress.

They’re also eager to win more votes from women, who preferred Obama over

his Republican opponents by more than 10 percentage points in his 2008 and 2012 elections and have favored the Democratic presidential candidate in each election since 1992.

Haley is the third consecutive woman GOP leaders have chosen to deliver their party’s response to Obama. Freshman Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, gave the address last year and Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., the No. 4 House GOP leader, did it in 2014.

Twenty-nine of the 300 GOP members of Congress, or about 10 percent, are women, about one-third the proportion of women among congressional Democrats. Each party also has three female governors, although GOP governors outnumber Democrats 31 to 18, plus an independent.

Haley said the nation’s problems also include an economy that’s not boosted family income, a national debt that’s too high and Obama’s health care law, which Republicans have long asserted has failed. She also cited “chaotic unrest in many of our cities,” which seemed a reference to community anger in several cities over killings by police of unarmed black people.

She said under a GOP president, Republicans would lower taxes, curb spending and debt and strengthen the military.

“We would make international agreements that were celebrated in Israel and protested in Iran, not the other way around,” she said, a reference to a treaty Obama and other nations negotiated with Iran to restrict its nuclear program that Republicans solidly oppose.

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Obama's State of the Union address seeks to frame 2016 race

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama's final State of the Union address will unmistakably attempt to frame the choice facing Americans as they select his successor, doling out an optimistic vision of the country's future in contrast with what he sees as the pessimism that's pervasive in the Republican primary.

Obama won't directly appeal for Americans to keep the Democratic Party in the White House for a third straight term. And he won't endorse a specific candidate in the 2016 race.

But he will outline domestic and international priorities that build on steps he's taken during his two terms in office, a vision certain to be more in line with Hillary Clinton and other Democrats than the GOP presidential candidates.

"He feels very optimistic about this future," White House chief of staff Denis McDonough said. "That, by the way, is something that's a little different than some of the doom and gloom that we hear from the Republican candidates out there every day."

Tuesday's prime-time address marks a transition for Obama — his last high-profile opportunity to speak to the public before voting begins on Feb. 1. While Obama has so far succeeded in staving off lame duck status — largely through a series of aggressive executive actions — the nation's attention has been drawn inevitably to the presidential contest. Still, Obama's reliance on executive powers means many of his actions could be erased by a Republican president. He's vowed to

campaign aggressively for the Democratic nominee, and his administration is seen as favoring Clinton, though the president won't formally back a candidate during his party's primary.

The looming election means that prospects are low for significant legislative accomplishments between the Democratic president and Republican lawmakers. Acknowledging that reality, Obama's speech will have few of the new policy proposals that typically fill the annual presidential address to Congress.

Still, the president will tout progress on the economy, which was plunging into the depths of recession when he took office and is now humming at a more comfortable pace. He's expected to keep up his appeals for broader actions to address gun violence, reform the criminal justice system and formally approve a sweeping Asia-Pacific trade pact. On foreign policy, he'll try to convince a public increasingly skeptical of his foreign policy stewardship that he has a handle on the volatile Middle East and is taking steps to prevent terrorism in the United States.

"There's a lot we have to get done over the course of the next year," White House spokesman Josh Earnest said.

The pomp and pageantry of the annual address in the House chamber will also have a splash of the gauzy nostalgia that's a hallmark of the Obama political operation. Among the guests sitting in first lady Michelle Obama's box will be Edith Childs, an elderly woman from South Carolina who first introduced Obama to the "Fired Up! Ready to go!" chant that became

ubiquitous during his 2008 campaign.

Also joining the first lady is Earl Smith, a Vietnam veteran who gave Obama a military patch in 2008 that the candidate carried in his pocket for the rest of the campaign. The White House said the patch will be archived in Obama's presidential library as "a reminder of the people who made up the movement that led the president to the White House."

But the Obamas' guests will also reflect what's likely to be left undone or incomplete when the president leaves office.

A chair in Mrs. Obama's box will be left empty to honor victims of gun violence. Despite a rash of mass shootings during his tenure, Obama has been unable to get Congress to

pass gun control legislation, settling instead for more modest executive actions, including steps announced last week to expand background checks for gun purchases.

The president has also invited a refugee from war-torn Syria to attend the address, a symbolic counter to Republicans proposing blocking Syrians seeking asylum in the U.S. But the selection is also a reminder of Obama's inability to end the bloodshed in Syria, where the nearly five-year civil war has spurred a refugee crisis and created a vacuum for terrorism.

Republicans selected South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley to give the opposing party's rebuttal. In another reminder of the fast-approaching election, Haley is seen as a potential running mate for the eventual GOP nominee.



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148 **The Post and Courier of Charleston
on the shrinking of rural areas**

Lowcountry residents are unlikely to be surprised that South Carolina's population is growing. Mount Pleasant, Charleston and Summerville are attracting so many new residents that they struggle with how to provide roads and schools to meet the increased needs.

But in many rural parts of the state, population is shrinking, and their economies are shrinking, too.

New Census Bureau data show that South Carolina overtook Alabama in population during the 12 months ending July 1.

Our population now is the 23rd-largest in the nation. Most of the growth is from people moving here. The rest is from the birth rate.

But in 13 S.C. counties, the number of deaths is exceeding births. In Allendale, for example, the population shrank by 7 percent during that same period. And along with a declining population comes less tax money to fund schools, less incentive for new business and industry to move in, and less likelihood that young adults will stay in their rural hometowns because jobs are scarce.

Studies have also shown that shrinking towns have lower educational attainment — and poorer schools. And more health problems — and fewer options for medical care.

The S.C. Supreme Court's recent decision requiring the Legislature to come up with a plan to improve education in the state's poorest rural counties reflects just how severe that disparity is.

Gov. Nikki Haley is to be commended for recognizing that rural areas need assistance. In addition to designating additional funds for rural schools, she has worked to direct new business and industry to small towns that need jobs — and reasons for people to move in, not out.

And several programs at the Medical University of South Carolina provide remote health care for people in rural areas without enough specialized doctors.

Unfortunately, the charming old homes of many small towns and pastoral beauty of rural areas have yet to attract many new residents. And without growth, planners predict that distressed communities will continue to dry up.

That is a hardship for residents and a threat to the well-being of the state. It is also another drain on infrastructure as people have to travel miles and miles to find work, see doctors and do their shopping.

One advance that could help both urban and rural areas would be better public transit connecting hubs to each other and connecting regions as well.

The Commerce Department must continue to lead the effort bringing new investment and jobs to rural South Carolina.



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2016 S.C. Legislative Preview

Roads, ethics reform, education remain top issues

BY JOSHUA LLOYD
Morning News
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COLUMBIA — Ahead of the start of the 2016 legislative session next week, lawmakers and budget experts from across the state met with South Carolina news reporters to preview topics expected to arise in the coming year.

Funding for transportation infrastructure improvements, ethics reform and education remain top issues.

In the last session, the House passed an infrastructure funding bill and more than a dozen ethics bills, with no response from the Senate.

Current budget projections show legislators will

have more than \$7.6 billion in net general fund revenue to work with this year, with nearly \$1.3 billion in unobligated funds.

Roads

At the start of the session South Carolina's Senate is under special order to take up debate on infrastructure funding. The tone among lawmakers remains optimistic that a comprehensive bill will pass.

Tom Davis, a Republican senator from Beaufort who blocked a road-repair proposal during a three-week filibuster last year, said he expects a comprehensive funding plan to pass sometime in February. However, debate over a gas tax and

Department of Transportation restructuring will be a contentious topic.

"They (Senate Finance Committee) wanted to

dump \$750 million into the very same system that has demonstrated its inability to address our needs, despite a 90 percent increase in funding over seven years," Davis said. "I think in order to get to any rational discussion about the gas tax, you've got to correct the expenditure process, you've got to have the DOT accountable directly to the governor and you've got to rein those guys in."

Horry County Republican Sen. Greg Hembree

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said a DOT restructuring isn't necessarily the primary key to fixing South Carolina's roads.

"We've been restructuring DOT for 45 years. This is not a new project for the General Assembly," Hembree said. "We have a formula that's been in place for a number of years now that prioritizes, with objective criteria, which roads need to be built. We need to follow the formula. It's that simple. There are certainly areas that need to be restructured, but I believe if the objective is to get politics out of the DOT. The way to do that is fully fund DOT with a revenue stream that we can't mess with."

Ethics

The House passed 13 ethics bills last session and an omnibus bill that wrapped each of the smaller bills into a comprehensive package.

Rep. Mandy Powers Norrell, a Lancaster Democrat, said the reasoning behind that model was to avoid a single component killing the entire movement after it hit the Senate floor.

"Those bills are well-thought-out and wonderfully packaged. We've been waiting patiently for those to be taken up, and we hope that will happen," Norrell said.

House Speaker Pro Tempore Tommy Pope, a Pickens Republican, said the

conversation on ethics reform seems to be on a loop from sessions past. A component he wants pushed through is independent investigations of legislators, meaning inspection of lawmakers by individuals outside the General Assembly during an investigation.

"That, to me, is the lowest-hanging fruit on the ethical tree and something we ought to knock out easily," Pope said. "Say I've been accused of something and there's been an investigation by my peers. Even though I've done nothing wrong, that allows someone the opportunity to say, 'Of course his peers didn't find anything wrong.' Why not let somebody outside of us do the investigation and let us move on?"

Sen. Shane Massey, an Edgefield Republican, said the two biggest ethics hang-ups in the Senate are debates over anonymous donors' disclosure of campaign funds and independent investigations.

"The most obvious is whether or not you ought to have independent investigations. I think it's a no-brainer, but not everybody listens to me," Massey said.

Assembly unity

Legislators spoke of an increased feeling of unity in the General Assembly after overwhelming displays of solidarity after the killings of nine black parishioners and the removal of the Confederate flag from Statehouse grounds.

That unity, however, may not transfer into the 2016 legislative session.

Republicans call for greater tax relief, while Democrats want more stable ways to raise money to pay for infrastructure. Democrats want to expand health care, while Republicans want to find private solutions to the problem.

"This will be my ninth session, and the Senate, to me, seems to be the most

divided it's ever been," Massey said.

"But I also think those divisions create great opportunities because it forces us to talk. A good bit of that has happened, but a lot more will have to happen. Hopefully, we can get there to resolve some issues."

The fact that 2016 is an election year has some lawmakers worried about inaction on critical legislation.

"It's election year, so I don't think we get much done until after the filing closes," said Orangeburg Sen. Brad Hutto. "I could be wrong about that, but some people aren't going to want to vote on the tax portions until they know whether they've got a vote or not."

Orangeburg Democratic Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter said her heart was warmed by the agreement on the Confederate flag, but that "spinally challenged" legislators won't take necessary risks during an election year.

"We don't really do anything that is going to make anybody halfway mad at us," Cobb-Hunter said.

Mopeds

A much-discussed topic in South Carolina is mopeds and the dangers they pose to regular vehicles. Several legislators said bills are in the works to address those problems.

"The objective is to get a comprehensive bill out of subcommittee early in the session," Hembree said.

"The trick with moped legislation is finding that sweet spot. Most people don't want to outlaw them outright, but mostly we want to regulate them properly. Right now, it's absolutely the Wild West."

Gov. Haley

House Minority Leader Todd Rutherford took time to call out Gov. Nikki Haley on her acceptance to give

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the GOP's response to the State of the Union on Tuesday evening.

"It seems to me that we're going to be auditioning our governor to be a vice-presidential candidate for Donald Trump," Rutherford said mockingly.

"As we do so, I think we're all going to have to be mindful not to do or say anything to displace her or cause any ideas that may knock her out from being candidate Trump's running mate."

Rutherford followed up

his comment by asking Republican lawmakers to keep the entirety of South Carolina in mind when voting this session.

The 122nd South Carolina General Assembly convenes Tuesday.

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JOSHUA LLOYD/MORNING NEWS

The 2016 South Carolina legislative session will begin next week at the South Carolina Statehouse.



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148 + 3 Haley joins the establishment

Removal of the Confederate battle flag from the Statehouse grounds is the gift that keeps on giving for S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley.

Not only will she receive a major leadership award Tuesday from Furman's Riley Institute for her role in taking down the flag, she's been tapped to give the national GOP response to President Barack Obama's final State of the Union address.

Cynics easily spin the speech as little more than an attempt to illustrate that Republicans can be brown and female, not just white and male. Others might take it a step further and say the nationally televised response is political payback. They'll remind you how the Republican National Committee chairman was on stage when Haley, who essentially ignored the flag in her first four years as governor, issued strong words to take it down after the Emanuel AME Church tragedy. Her voice for flag removal helped to thwart the possibility of weeks of uncomfortable questions from pesky reporters every time a GOP presidential candidate campaigned for votes in South Carolina's early primary. With the flag issue off the table, candidates could run their races. Meanwhile, moderate voters who wanted the flag down would not be reminded how Statehouse Republicans had kept up the flag for years.

Conspiracy theories aside, something more elegant may really be going on: Nikki Haley may be growing up politically, less a firebrand, more of a figure of the establishment.

When Haley took office in 2011, she schmoozed and got legislators thinking that coming years would be a walk in the park compared with the testy re-

lationship between the GOP-led General Assembly and former Gov. Mark Sanford.

But after some early successes with Cabinet appointments and the welcome of Boeing, Haley and leading lawmakers soon were at loggerheads. Legislators complained she was quiet about a tax break for Amazon when leadership was needed. She angered folks when she got rid of philanthropist Darla Moore



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Statehouse Report

from the University of South Carolina board. Haley irritated lawmakers with a plan to force them to return to finish her political agenda. And she tried to get rid of state funding for SCETV. Within six months of being sworn in as governor, stories outlined how Haley needed to mend lots of fences.

She then focused on ethics reform — which still hasn't happened — and getting the state's residents back to work, which has happened with the lowest unemployment rates in almost a generation. She railed against "Obamacare," pumping up her tea-party base by not wanting to accept free federal money to allow 200,000 of the poorest of South Carolinians to be able to get health insurance. She didn't slice and burn budgets with lots of vetoes.

As time passed, Haley's on-the-job training as governor seems to have moved her toward the middle, although she'll keep throwing red meat to anti-Obama conservatives during Tuesday's national speech.

She didn't, for example, veto an early-childhood-education program in 2013 pushed by Democratic nemesis Sen. Vincent Sheheen to expand 4-year-old kindergarten. And she didn't stop the program the following year when more money was appropriated to add more kids to the roll books.

Haley, once vociferous that she wouldn't raise gas taxes to pay for crumbling roads, may be mellowing on that a bit, especially after October floods broke dams and ruined roads across the Midlands, Pee Dee and Lowcountry. Just this week, the state Chamber of Commerce, led by former Haley chief of staff Ted Pitts, said South Carolina needed higher gas taxes for infrastructure, perhaps an early crutch for the governor to use to amend earlier toughness on gas taxes.

Also this week, Haley said she'll seek \$19 million — yes, new spending — for 144 new prosecutors, 88 public defenders, three judges and staffers to help thwart the high rate of domestic violence that grips the state.

Bottom line: The Nikki Haley of 2016 isn't the woman who took office in 2011. But with South Carolina already such a red state, you've got to wonder whether the new attention will have legs for something bigger for the hyper-ambitious governor.

P.S. Know these names? U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers and U.S. Sen. Joni Ernst? They gave the GOP responses in 2014 and 2015, respectively.

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148 Longtime SC state Sen. O'Dell dies

The Associated Press

COLUMBIA — Longtime South Carolina state Sen. Billy O'Dell died Thursday at the age of 77, authorities said.

Greenwood County Coroner Sonny Cox said his office was notified and responded a little before 11 a.m. to lawmaker's home, where he was pronounced dead. Cox said the cause of death is thought to be related to a heart condition.

Senate Majority Leader Harvey Peeler, R-Gaffney, called for a moment of silence during a gathering of dozens of reporters and editors in a legislative building.

"When I think of Sen. O'Dell, I think of his support for The Citadel and his great love of South Carolina," Peeler said during a break in the session. "He brought a calmness to the Senate. He was very reasoned. He didn't talk much, but when he did, we listened."

Senate President Pro Tem Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence, called O'Dell an "exceptional man."

"He was a consensus builder and reached across party lines," he said. "The Senate will sorely miss his voice and his leadership."

Entering the Senate in 1989, O'Dell served on several powerful committees including Senate Finance and Labor, Commerce and

Industry. He also chaired the General Committee, which serves as a catch-all for special projects, such as the panel that investigated the Department of Social Services over the past two years.

O'Dell graduated from The Citadel in 1960 and was CEO of the O'Dell Corporation, a mop, broom and dust mop manufacturing company started by his father after he returned from service in World War II, according to the company's website.

He held a variety of positions within the business community in the Greenwood County and at the state level, serving as director of the State Chamber of Commerce in the 1980s. He served on The Citadel Board of Visitors for a decade, according to O'Dell's legislative biography.

In a statement, Gov. Nikki Haley said she was grateful for the service of O'Dell, who she said had "worked tirelessly for the people of his district and the state."

Haley added that O'Dell "made South Carolina a better place."

O'Dell's death is the second in the tightknit Senate chamber in seven months. Last June, state Sen. Clementa Pinckney was among nine parishioners shot to death during a Bible study at Emanuel AME Church in downtown Charleston.