

Title: **House letter to Haley takes gas tax off table**
 Author: BY JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press
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S.C. HOUSE

House letter to Haley takes gas tax off table

House will take up roads after dealing with the budget next week and taking a two-week break after Easter

Haley supports Senate plan to set aside surplus for roads

BY JEFFREY COLLINS
 Associated Press
 COLUMBIA

Republican leaders in the South Carolina House sent a letter to Gov. Nikki Haley on Wednesday promising they won't insist on their version of a bill passed last year to get more money for roads.

The promise from House Speaker Jay Lucas means any increase in the state's gas tax won't happen this year.

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into education and local government have not been kept.

In his letter, Lucas said the House will either agree to the Senate bill or just pass an amendment to change the way the Department of Transportation is run and send that back to the Senate. The Senate bill allows the governor to name all eight members of the DOT board and the board then to pick a secretary to run

A tax hike seemed remote after population growth and a humming economy brought more than \$1 billion of additional revenue into the state, but Democrats and some Republicans said the state still needs to find a stable source of extra money for roads.

Haley supports the plan passed earlier this month by the Senate that promis-

es to set aside \$400 million from this year's extra money in the budget for roads. Critics said that isn't enough money to widen highways in a rapidly growing state and that the money is only guaranteed for a year. Similar promises to put money

SEE ROADS, 8A

the agency.

The House will take up roads after dealing with the budget next week and taking a two-week break after Easter. Lucas, whose district includes part of Lancaster County, asked the governor for patience.

"We appreciate you respecting our legislative responsibilities by reserving judgment until after the House has been given a necessary amount of time to review the Senate amendment," Lucas wrote in his letter also signed by

Majority Leader Bruce Bannister and state Rep. Gary Simrill, R-Rock Hill, who spent months putting together the House roads plan.

Haley said Wednesday the House needs to take up the Senate plan now, wondering if the 124 House members, whose seats are all up for re-election this year, were waiting until filing for the primary ends March 30 before dealing with roads.

"The Senate bill is much stronger than the House bill," Haley said.



Title: **No tax break needed for military retirees**

Author: By The Herald Editorial Board

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OUR VIEW

No tax break needed for military retirees

By The Herald Editorial Board

Many conservatives like to say that, when it comes to promoting economic growth, government should not pick winners and losers. But those who favor a special income tax exemption for military retirees in South Carolina are doing just that.

Gov. Nikki Haley's budget proposal for 2016-2017 includes a one-year, \$9.8 million tax cut for military retirees as an incentive for more of them to move to the state. This is the first cut in a proposed three-year phase-in that, when finalized, would cost the state \$33 million a year.

The proposal passed unanimously in the S.C. House last year but went nowhere in the Senate. Supporters will lobby senators again this session to pass the measure.

Haley argues that attracting military retirees in their mid-40s and 50s to the state would produce a valuable talent pool. She argues that the state would benefit from income produced by the retirees' second jobs, their economic activity, including purchases of homes, autos and other big-ticket items, and income from spouses and other family members.

Within a decade, supporters assert, the benefits would outpace the initial costs of the tax cut.

Eighteen other states offer full state income tax exemptions for military retirement money. Another 16 states offer a partial exemption.

But while that benefit might be a reason retirees choose to move to one state or another, we doubt it is the only one. Military retirees, like others in that age group, have to consider a variety of factors, including climate, overall cost of living, quality of schools, availability of recreational opportunities, cultural activities and others.

South Carolina already excels in a number of those categories. It is questionable whether offering a costly income tax exemption to one group would significantly enhance retirees' migration to the state.

Under Haley's proposal, military retirees would be the winners. The rest of the state's taxpayers, who would somehow have to make up the lost \$33 million annually, would be the losers.

Haley's proposal to give tax relief to former military personnel comes on the heels of a demand that the Legislature match any increase in the state's gasoline tax with a cut the state's top income tax rate to 5 percent from 7 per-

cent over a 10-year period. When fully phased in by 2025, that would deplete state revenues by about \$1.4 billion a year, with most of the benefits going to the state's wealthier taxpayers.

The state Senate is considering a proposal to use \$400 million next year in general fund revenues to pay for a fraction of needed road repairs rather than increase the gas tax. How is the state supposed to take care of all its pressing needs, including the mandate to provide equal access to a quality education for all children in the state, if it continually depletes its sources of revenue?

Military retirees undoubtedly are a deserving group who have served their country, often for decades. But one could ask whether other groups might also be deserving of tax breaks – police, firefighters, teachers, rescue workers.

Singling out one group for special tax privileges is a slippery slope.

This military-friendly state already is home to thousands of military retirees. Many of them, we suspect, would be willing to continue to pay taxes like everyone else – especially if it would result in fixing the state's roads.

Title: **Inmajor reversal, Obama backs offplans to allow Atlantic offshore drilling**
 Author: BY VERABERGENGRUEN McClatchy WashingtonBureau
 Size: 179.49 square inch
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ENVIRONMENT

In major reversal, Obama backs off plans to allow Atlantic offshore drilling

BY VERA BERGENGRUEN

McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON

The Obama administration said Tuesday it will not allow offshore drilling in the southeast Atlantic Ocean – a significant reversal from its original plan and a major victory to coastal communities and environmental activists who fought the proposal.

Opponents galvanized around the issue last year after the Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management released a draft of the 5-year plan that included leasing waters off the coasts of South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia and Virginia in 2021.

Claire Douglass, the environmental group Oceana's campaign director for climate and energy, said the news was a major victory.

"This is a huge win, not only for the Atlantic Ocean but for the process that it fostered," she told McClatchy. "At the beginning, the Obama administration made it clear they wanted to hear from the public and stakeholders that this would impact the most, and it's clear he listened."

The White House on County: York

Tuesday said the Interior Department received more than 1 million comments on the proposed draft.

In South Carolina, 23 municipalities representing every coastal town and city in the state formally opposed oil exploration off their coastline. A coalition of more than 400 small businesses called on Gov. Nikki Haley to reverse her support for oil exploration, which she has said will bring jobs and energy independence.

Haley called Tuesday's decision "just another disappointment from D.C."

"It's not something that we were excited to see, but not something that really surprises me, to see them turn around and pull the rug out from under us," she said. Opening the coast to oil exploration wasn't just about jobs but also energy independence, and the state government wouldn't have supported any moves to harm the coast, she said.

"Tourism is too huge to South Carolina to take that chance," Haley said.

But other S.C. lawmakers

welcomed the decision.

"This is fantastic news for the coast of South Carolina," said Rep. Mark Sanford, R-S.C., whose 1st Congressional District runs along nearly the entire length of the Palmetto State coastline. "Residents along our coast should be proud of the way they united on this issue and sent a compelling message to Washington."

Sanford also praised local activists, saying in a Facebook post Tuesday that just this weekend, he had ridden his bike near the beach and had seen residents' "Don't Drill SC" yard signs.

In the Interior Department's five-year plan announced on Tuesday, there are 13 potential offshore lease sales for drilling exploration; all of them are in the Gulf of Mexico or off the coast of Alaska. None is in the Atlantic "due to current market dynamics, strong local opposition and conflicts with competing commercial and military ocean uses," the department said.

Tuesday's announcement was a disappointment to oil companies and the governors of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia who had enthusiastically supported offshore drilling on their coasts, which they said would create thousands of jobs and billions in revenue for their states.

"This is not how you harness America's economic and diplomatic potential," said American Petroleum Institute President and CEO Jack Gerard in a statement on Tuesday's release. He said the decision would increase energy costs and hurt growth in jobs and investment.

In the past year, more than 100 municipalities along the Atlantic Coast – from small beach towns to the coastal cities of Savannah, Ga., Charleston and Myrtle Beach – formally opposed offshore drilling, despite a proposed 50-mile buffer along the coastline.

Local business leaders along the coastline said the offshore plan could threaten the beaches that draw millions of tourists

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every year, as well as fisheries and the larger ocean economy. Environmentalists expressed concerns about marine life and the possibility of a disaster similar to the 2012 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

There also was opposition from an unlikely place: the Pentagon, which conducts live training exercises, military maneuvers and missile tests off the same coastline. The Washington Post first reported the Pentagon's opposition. The military has several major bases along the coastline, including Marine Base Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, and Naval Station Norfolk and Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia.

On a call with reporters on Monday, oil industry leaders said allowing access to develop energy offshore resources is critical if the United States wants to reduce its dependence on foreign oil.

"This is American energy security, American jobs and U.S. government revenue tied up by political red tape," said Erik

Milito, director of upstream and industry operations at the American Petroleum Institute, adding that "offshore drilling is safer now than ever before."

"The new five-year plan will determine whether these states will join the American energy revolution or continue to sit on the sidelines," he said.

Supporters of the original leasing plan said Tuesday that tourism, fishing and military activity can coexist and even benefit from offshore drilling, and they blamed environmentalists for alarmist rhetoric.

"It is downright shameful how radical groups used scare tactics to spread misleading and outright false information to communities across the Atlantic coast," Rep. Jeff Duncan, R-S.C., an inland lawmaker who is co-chairman of the Atlantic Offshore Energy Caucus, said in a statement.

Offshore drilling advocates, including statewide elected leaders, on Tuesday said that with this step, the Obama administration is failing to

present a serious plan to meet the country's energy needs in coming decades.

Offshore drilling could be a key energy issue in this year's presidential election. Republican candidates for president have expressed support for increasing all drilling, while Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders have opposed offshore drilling, especially along the Atlantic coast.

"The exclusion guarantees that domestic energy policy will be a major issue in the presidential election, and underscores the critical need for the nominees of both parties to bring forward thoughtful, intellectually serious energy policies," said Consumer Energy Alliance president David Holt in a statement on Tuesday.

The new five-year plan may not be finalized until Obama leaves office, putting even more pressure on candidates running to succeed him to clarify their energy plans.

More than 3 billion barrels of oil are recoverable on the outer continental shelf, along with

more than 30 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, according to the Interior Department.

Cassie Cope of The State in Columbia, and John Murawski of The News & Observer in Raleigh, N.C., contributed to this report. White House correspondent Anita Kumar contributed from Washington.

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THIS IS FANTASTIC NEWS FOR THE COAST OF SOUTH CAROLINA. RESIDENTS ALONG OUR COAST SHOULD BE PROUD OF THE WAY THEY UNITED ON THIS ISSUE AND SENT A COMPELLING MESSAGE TO WASHINGTON.

U.S. Rep. Mark Sanford, R-S.C.

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“**THIS IS AMERICAN ENERGY SECURITY, AMERICAN JOBS AND U.S. GOVERNMENT REVENUE TIED UP BY POLITICAL RED TAPE.***Erik Milito, American Petroleum Institute*

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AP FILE PHOTO 2008

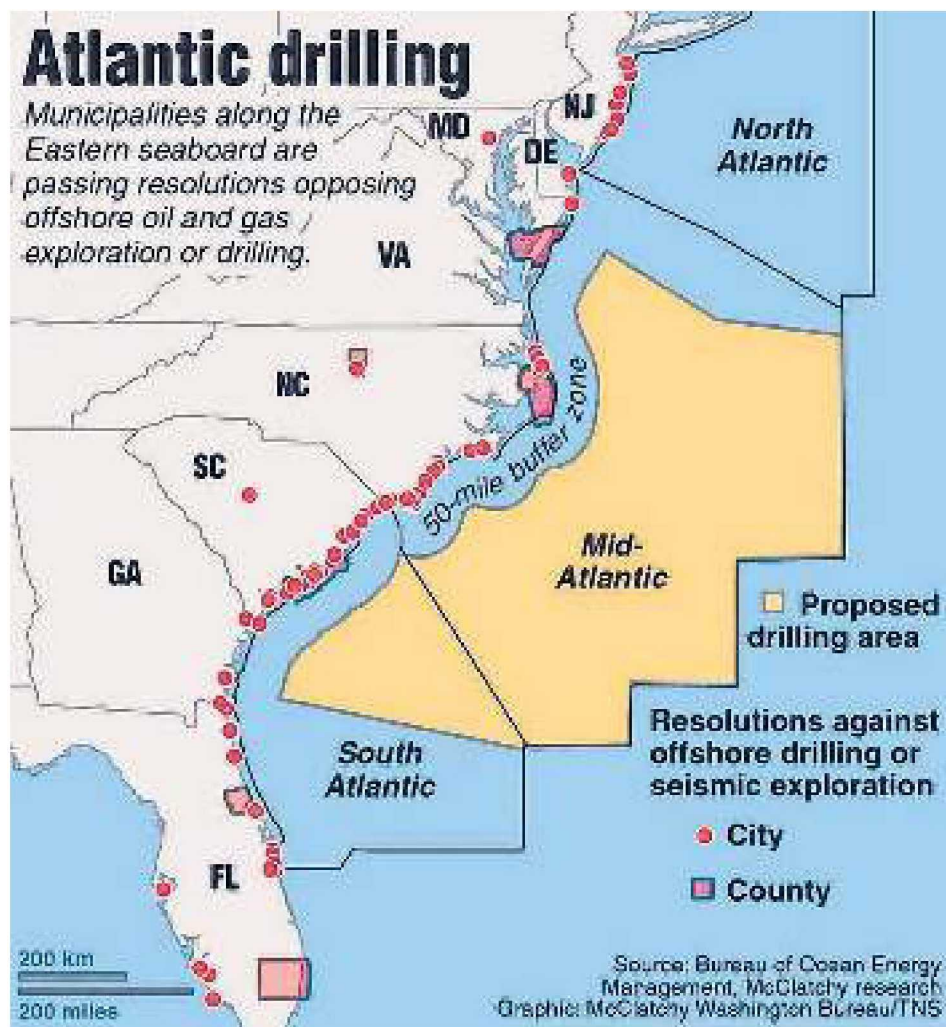
The Chevron Genesis Oil Rig Platform is seen in the Gulf of Mexico near New Orleans.

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Title: **Legislature needs to reform ethics law**

Author:

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Legislature needs to reform ethics law

Ethics reform has been one of Gov. Nikki Haley's priority legislative issues for several years, and each year, the Legislature has arrived and departed Columbia without addressing the state's weak and vague



ethics law.

South Carolina is graded a shameful D-, and 36th nationally, in the State

Integrity Investigation's most recent assessment of state governments' accountability and transparency laws and systems.

The General Assembly's refusal to strengthen the ethics law reinforces citizens' belief that legislators are watching out for themselves instead of those who elected them.

Politicians don't appear to share the public's sagacious interest in integrity

and accountability. Otherwise, ethics reform would have occurred long ago.

Will this be the year that the Legislature does the right thing for its constituents? There's still time, but will it happen?

An elected official's position is always temporary. People's perception of whether officials are good stewards of the public's trust ultimately determines how long they remain on the job. In putting ethics reform on the back burner year after year, elected officials are destroying the public's trust in them. They're also losing future votes.

— Linda C. Gamble
Lexington

Title: **Upstate senator complains of group's ethics bill campaign**
 Author: TIM SMITH TCSMITH@GREENVILLENEWS.COM
 Size: 59.52 square inch
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Upstate senator complains of group's ethics bill campaign

TIM SMITH

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COLUMBIA — Senate Judiciary Committee Larry Martin of Pickens says a group's campaign against a pending ethics bill has gone too far.

Martin told the Senate Thursday that the same group and tactics used to defeat any increase in the gas tax are being used by the group to attack a pending ethics bill dealing with income disclosure by lawmakers and who would investigate ethics complaints against them.

The bill is the latest version of ethics reform, an issue that Gov. Nikki Haley and GOP legislative leaders say they want enacted but which has failed to pass in years of attempts.

Martin took to the floor Thursday and said the group is putting out misinformation, which he called a "smear" campaign against him and against the ethics bill.

Martin said the group called into his district, encouraging citizens to call him about ethics

legislation he said the group is claiming would gag citizens from talking to lawmakers. He said the group also is claiming the bill would allow "politicians to police themselves for corruption, make it easier for politicians to hide who pays them," and "expose you to intimidation by powerful politicians."

"It's the most ludicrous piece of information I have ever seen go out," he said.

He said the campaign, which has been picked up by talk radio in Greenville, is being used in other senators' districts as well.

Republicans and Democrats in the chamber defended Martin in the attacks, and some said the attacks will continue until lawmakers pursue legislation requiring the disclosure of donors to such groups.

Senate President Pro Tempore Hugh Leatherman called such misinformation "smut."

Dave Schwartz, state direc-

tor of the South Carolina chapter for Americans For Prosperity, issued a statement to *The Greenville News* about the senators' remarks.

"The threatening and intimidating remarks made today are exactly why citizens are calling them about these unethical bills," he said. "Larry Martin and Hugh Leatherman have been powerful politicians for more than 30 years – it's no surprise they want to pass laws that will protect the political class at the expense of hard-working taxpayers."

The bill in question, which is next in line for debate after a bill dealing with refugees, would send ethics investigations of lawmakers to the State Ethics Commission, instead of by each chamber's ethics committees as is now done. Those committees, however, would

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Ethics

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still decide what punishment, if any, would be given to the offending lawmaker.

The bill also would require the disclosure of private sources of income in addition to public sources, but not amounts of income from private sources. Exempted from disclosure would be income pursuant to court orders, from savings accounts and investments.

The South Carolina Policy Council has criticized the bill for its

changes in what would have to be disclosed in public income.

Various other ethics bills dealing with other parts of the House-passed legislation sit on the Senate calendar but are not set for debate. Among them is a bill dealing with disclosure of donors for so-called independent committees, groups that are involved in the political process.

Martin said one aim of the group's campaigning in his district is the inde-

pendent committee bill, though that is not part of the bill up for debate.

"Why in the world would someone put out that this would trample on their constitutional rights?" he asked. "What is it they are after? They are obviously out to do me some political harm."

Martin said this type of campaign "makes serving in public office and trying to do the right thing extremely difficult."

"It's extremely frustrating when you are char-

acterized in such a way," he said. "This is not right. This is not about good government. This is not even close. Common decency would suggest you at least get close to what's in that bill."

Martin said it's almost reached the point now that senators are discouraged from doing anything that might possibly run afoul of the group.

"I'm not going to be intimidated," Martin said. "This body is going to have the opportunity to



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debate ethics reform as it is embodied in this bill.”

Some Democrats said they want to see the independent committee bill brought up for debate. Martin said he thought it ought to be part of the bill that’s set for debate but isn’t.

“It bothers me when people come into our districts and do these kind of things and feed our con-

stituents things that aren’t true,” said Sen. Thomas McElveen, a Sumter Democrat. “I think as long as we allow these things to work, they are going to keep doing it.”

Sen. Brad Hutto, an Orangeburg Democrat, said the information campaign by the group worked with the gas tax issue “so why

won’t they keep trying it again?”

“The senator from Pickens, there is no more honorable person serving up here and he does not deserve this,” Hutto said of the information being spread. “This is absolutely untrue. The point is, we’re going to let this happen again and again if we don’t stand up and say it’s time for this to stop.”

Hutto said it’s fair for any group to wage a campaign on an issue but “just disclose who you are.”

Martin said whoever is putting out the misinformation “has the First Amendment right to lie. This is America. You can do whatever you want. You know what? You ought to at least know who’s doing the lying and who’s paying for it.”

Title: **Haley to deliver keynote speech**
 Author: AMANDA COYNE THE GREENVILLE NEWS
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Haley to deliver keynote speech

AMANDA COYNE
 THE GREENVILLE NEWS

Gov. Nikki Haley will deliver the keynote address at the Tennessee Republican Party's annual Statesmen's Dinner.

The speaking spot is one that has been occupied by former presidential contenders Gov. Jeb Bush in 2015 and Gov. Chris Christie in 2014, as well as President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. The state party's announcement of Haley's speech noted that she is "routinely mentioned as a potential 2016 vice-presidential candidate for the Republican Party."

Speculation has swirled that Haley has been on the vice-presidential shortlist since June, when Haley implored the General Assembly to vote to remove the Confederate battle flag from State House grounds after nine black parishoners were murdered at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston by an apparent white supremacist. She has routinely demurred when asked if she would accept the nomination.

Sen. Marco Rubio, whom Haley endorsed in South Carolina's GOP presidential primary, said the eventual nominee should consider Haley as a potential running mate. After Rubio dropped out of the presidential race Tuesday, Haley, when asked, said she would support Sen. Ted Cruz for the nomination.

Title: **Putting governor in charge is risky, but safer than alternative**
 Author: By Cindi Ross Scoppe
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OTHER VOICES

Putting governor in charge is risky, but safer than alternative

By Cindi Ross Scoppe

State Sen. Joel Lourie and I have been having a running conversation about my insistence on turning control of the Transportation Department over to the governor.

He reminds me that this governor – like her predecessor – has overseen disasters at the agencies she already controls and the dismemberment of our environmental protections at an agency she only tangentially controls. I say voters will never make better choices until they have to live with the consequences of those choices.

He says that might be fine if we lived in a purple state, but since the Republican is always going to be elected, there's no accountability. I quote Lindsay Graham, who until recently said of the president's Supreme Court nominees, "Elections have consequences."

One night last week, Joel sent me an email linking to news about the disaster engulfing the Department of Juvenile Justice and asking, simply: "And we want another cabinet agency??"

It's a tough time to believe in checks and balances and letting

the state's chief executive execute the laws. Again.

We've been here before. We've lived through dead babies that the Department of Social Services didn't have time to check back in on and a state full of stolen tax records at the Revenue Department and the TB debacle at DHEC, which isn't a Cabinet agency but whose director at the time acted as though it were. We watched Gov. Nikki Haley burn through two directors of the Department of Employment and Workforce and two at the Transportation Department, where she can hire and fire the director, but the Legislature's commission can derail that director's efforts.

Each time, opponents of executive authority said, essentially, "I told you so." This, they said, is why

the governor shouldn't be able to hire and fire agency directors, or at least not any more agency directors.

It's a compelling argument. Until you flip it around. Until you ask, "What's the alternative?"

For much of South Carolina's history, the official alternative has been for the Legislature to be in charge of state agencies. But since at least the 1970s, when government became too big and complex for a handful of all-powerful legislative leaders to personally oversee, the real alternative has been for no one to be in charge. Or no one who is even indirectly accountable to the voters.

The alternative has been for legislators to appoint people they can't then unappoint (as is still the case at the Transportation Department), and for those part-time commissioners to hire and fire the agency directors. In some cases, the governor appointed the boards, but also without the authority to remove them when they drove the agency into a ditch.

Sometimes the directors did a great job. Sometimes they did a lousy job.

There were dead babies at DSS back when the Legislature's commission ran the place. The Department of Workforce and Employment was created from the ashes of the Employment Security Commission, which imploded under the direction of the Legislature's commissioners. We had abuses when Juvenile Justice was run by commission instead of a Cabinet secretary.

Anyone who thought turning control of those agencies over to the governor would make all the problems go away wasn't paying attention. The form of government doesn't create or eliminate problems. The form of government makes it easier or more difficult to

correct problems. The form of government makes it easier or more difficult for the voters to hold elected officials accountable when problems aren't corrected.

I don't expect government to operate perfectly, any more than I expect perfection from Time Warner or my credit card company or the business that mows my lawn.

What I expect is for my government to avoid doing things that any reasonable person should know will cause problems, and to act quickly to correct problems when they occur.

It is deeply disturbing to learn that gangs have started three riots in eight months at the Department of Juvenile Justice's main facility and left other juveniles and staff in fear for their lives.

It is more disturbing because of the similarity to the problem at DSS: The agency has allowed vulnerable children for whose well-being the state has assumed responsibility to be put at grave risk.

It is more disturbing because of the similarity to the problem at the Revenue Department: A vital position related to the breach was left vacant. At Revenue, hackers had their way with our poorly secured tax information during a year when the job of computer-security director remained vacant. At Juvenile Justice, gangs seized a foothold in a year with no gang-intervention specialist or rapid-response team and three years – three years – with no police chief. At a prison.

We still know much less than we don't know about the situation at the Department of Juvenile Justice. But it seems clear that either the governor is not paying close enough attention to an agency with the constant potential for convulsive problems or else she's being misled by her director.

Our saving grace is that we have given the governor the power to

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correct either problem. She has to do that. Now.

Scoppe writes editorials and columns for The State. Reach her at cscoppe@thestate.com follow her on Twitter @CindiScoppe.

Title: **Civil rights tour comes amid heated political climate**
 Author: BY MEG KINNARD Associated Press
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Civil rights tour comes amid heated political climate

BY MEG KINNARD

Associated Press

COLUMBIA

Civil rights movement veterans and U.S. Reps. Jim Clyburn and John Lewis are leading more than a dozen members of Congress on a three-day history and race relations tour of South Carolina, culminating Sunday with services at the Charleston church where nine black parishioners were gunned down last June.



Clyburn

The event comes during the vitriolic and sometimes violent presidential campaign season that has seen blacks and whites face off at rallies for Republican Donald Trump. Just 150 miles away in Fayetteville, N.C., a white Trump supporter was captured last week on video punching a black protester who was being escorted from a

North Carolina rally.

Both Democrats and Republicans are part of the civil rights tour, including GOP South Carolina Sens. Tim Scott and Lindsey Graham, a one-time candidate for president.

Organizers hope the Pilgrimage to South Carolina that started Friday will be an exercise in forgiveness and strength in a state whose reaction to last summer's violence at Emanuel AME Church has been held out by some as a model of how to handle racially charged situations.

"I don't think there's any room in our society, whether in a movement in a political campaign, for violence," said Lewis, who recalled 1961, when he was beaten and left bloody in a Greyhound bus station in Rock Hill during civil rights protests. Ultimately, one of the men who had beaten Lewis, former Ku Klux Klan

member Elwin Wilson, came to Washington and sought his forgiveness in 2009.

"I said, I accept your apology, I forgive you. ... It is time for all of us to lay down the burden of division in civil rights and create a loving community," Lewis said.

After the June 17 slayings - in which the suspect is a white man who had expressed support for white supremacy and the Confederate flag - relatives of the nine people killed expressed forgiveness for Dylann Roof, with some saying they would pray for him. Gov. Nikki Haley has frequently expressed pride at how the state didn't devolve into riots, like other places have experienced after shootings in the past two years.

The Faith and Politics Institute has held such bipartisan events in five

southern states since 1998.

Clyburn is the first black congressman from South Carolina since Reconstruction, and Scott is the first black U.S. senator from the Deep South since Reconstruction. Lewis, a veteran of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, suffered a skull fracture during the march in Selma, Alabama, more than a half-century ago.

Taking a break from partisan politics in the contentious presidential election year, the group is visiting churches in the Columbia area as well as the site of the Orangeburg Massacre where three students were killed during a protest of a segregated bowling alley in 1968.

They will also discuss the effect of the Charleston church shootings, and worship at Emanuel AME on Sunday.

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Courtesy Robert E. McNair Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina

National Guard troops create a road block in Orangeburg after the killings of three South Carolina State students in 1968.

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ANDY BURRISS aburris@heraldonline.com

U.S. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga, left, talks with Elwin Wilson of Rock Hill in Lewis' Washington, D.C., office in February 2009 before taping a television interview with "Good Morning America."

Title: **Government should be transparent**

Author:

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EDITORIAL

Government should be transparent

Transparency should be the first order of business with any elected official. From the smallest town council to Congress, the first order of business should be transparency, not dirty-glass transparent, but as crystal clear as your grandma's living room window transparent.

Elected officials often forget that the public are their customers. They serve us. They use our money to conduct our business.

It is not the elected officials' place to self-police their actions, it's the public's right to know what their elected officials are doing.

And we shouldn't have to take elected officials to court to see what they're doing.

S.C. Rep. Bill Taylor, R-Aiken, is once again championing the cause of a bill that would reform South Carolina's Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA. The bill was approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee with a 17-1 vote Tuesday. Sen. Tom Young, R-Aiken, and Sen. Shane Massey, R-Aiken, voted in favor of the bill.

Last year, the same bill died in the Senate despite Taylor's best efforts, but 2016 is a new year and Taylor is fighting the cause again.

"This is truly a people's bill," said Taylor. "This allows for citizens and the press, of course, to use the Freedom of Information

Act as it should be used where they are able to have full transparency of government, be able to get information from government easily and inexpensively."

If the FOIA bill passes, it would cut the time for receiving a requested response for information from 15 days to 10 days, create two sets of time limits in which government bodies would have to produce records, and also create the office of Freedom of Information Act Review within the Administrative Law Court.

A hearing officer would hear FOIA disputes rather than filing in circuit court. Taylor said circuit court could be costly and take years. Money spent on attorney's fees contesting FOIA requests in court might fix a road or two.

According to Taylor, this FOIA bill has been six years in the making, filed three times and has had nearly 20 hearings.

"It is one of the most thoroughly vetted bills that we've been through," he said.

Taylor finds the minority report inserted by Sen. Margie Bright Matthews, D-Colleton, who opposes the FOIA bill, difficult as one person can basically block and stop the work that has progressed through 20 hearings.

Matthews won the District 45 seat in a special election after the death of Sen. Clementa Pinckney.



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Taylor said the FOIA bill is about regular citizens having access to materials from a government they pay for.

“It’s the people’s government, and they have a right to know,” Taylor said last year when the bill failed to make it to Gov. Nikki Haley’s desk.

Taylor feels hopeful the FOIA bill will persevere, but if it doesn’t this time, you can rest assured he’ll be back next year.

The Statehouse needs more people like Bill Taylor, Tom Young and Shane Massey, who promote the public’s right to know. Six years is too long to wait to see the right thing done.