



Title: **House OKs ousting S.C.State trustees**
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House OKs ousting S.C. State trustees

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Proposal to abolish CHE likely to fail in Senate

The S.C. House voted Tuesday to oust S.C. State University's trustees.

Meanwhile, a House proposal to abolish the state Commission on Higher Education, propelled in part by displeasure at that agency's failure to raise red flags about S.C. State's management, appears likely to fail in the Senate.

Frustrated by S.C. State's \$17 million deficit, House members approved replacing the school's current board with a five trustees appointed by the state Budget and Control Board.

The Senate passed its own proposal to oust S.C. State's trustees last week. The Senate bill would have new board members appointed by lawmakers and Gov. Nikki Haley.

"What we do want the body to understand is that we can't maintain the status quo," state Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter, D-Orangeburg, told House members before the proposal passed.

She noted S.C. State is on probation with its accreditors, adding the school has been told improvements need to be made to its governance and finances. The accreditation issue is im-

portant because students cannot get federal loans to go to unaccredited schools. "It is our understanding that very little progress has been made," Cobb-Hunter told House members.

"It's really common sense," state Rep. Jim Merrill, R-Berkeley, said of the House's action to replace the school's board. "When people are provided with the facts, they recognize there is a serious problem that needed to be dealt with."

S.C. State trustees met Tuesday but did not announce a severance settlement with suspended president Thomas Elzey, who has sued the school for breach of contract, claiming he has been made a scapegoat for the school's woes.

Meanwhile, the House is also sending a signal to the Commission on Higher Education.

Merrill successfully pushed to defund that state agency Monday, taking away its \$3 million budget.

Merrill proposed Tuesday using the state budget, which the House is debating this week, to replace that coordinating commission with a stronger board of regents that

would oversee the state's public colleges.

However, Speaker Pro Tempore Tommy Pope, R-York, who was presiding over the House for part of Tuesday, ruled a board of regents could not be created via the vehicle of the state budget.

The House's proposal to defund the Commission on Higher Education likely will hit a roadblock in the state Senate.

Citing Senate rules, Senate President Pro Tempore Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence, said Tuesday that changes to the agency should be made through standalone legislation, not as part of the state budget.

Leatherman said there might be reason to take action against the commission, adding he has been frustrated with it in the past.

The executive director of the commission said Tuesday that he shares some of legislators' frustrations. "I share many of them with the same conviction and passion," said Richard Sutton.

Whether the state agency that oversees higher education is a weak commission or coordinating council or a stronger board of regents is "a question

of the authorities that the Legislature grants to that state agency," Sutton said.

Sutton said a board of regents in a state with a strong central government – like Georgia, where he worked for many years – has the authority to hire and fire university and college presidents. "That board supersedes any institutional board of trustees."

However, South Carolina has opted for a weaker commission with the Legislature itself sometimes deciding higher education policy.

A House bill to create a board of regents, sponsored by Rep. Murrell Smith, R-Sumter, was pre-filed in December. A similar bill also exists in the Senate, sponsored by Sen. Gerald Malloy, D-Darlington.

Still, conflicts can emerge between schools, regulators and lawmakers, Sutton added.

"There is a natural tension between the desires of an institution to be autonomous. ... the state's responsibility to have an oversight agency that ensures some level of efficiency and the Legislature's own interest in establishing a role for itself in setting educational actions," Sutton said.

Title: **S.C. House rejects \$10M in funds**
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S.C. House rejects \$10M in funds

Hixon proposes amendment for Winter Storm Pax expenses

BY MAAYAN SCHECHTER
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Although the South Carolina House rejected ponying up to \$10 million to cover 22 counties impacted by the February ice storm, S.C. Rep. Bill Hixon, R-North Augusta, says he was "promised" by both House representatives and the governor's office that help will come.

Standing beside several House members whose communities also were impacted by the February 2014 ice storm, Hixon proposed an amendment Wednesday to the 2015-2016 fiscal year budget to make up funding for those counties, including Aiken County, by pulling funds out of other departments to cover the expenses.

"Before, I had talked to the governor's office and was told there was nothing in her (2015-2016) budget, and then I had talked to the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, and they didn't put it in

their budget, so I said I needed to do something," Hixon said. "I drafted the amendment and asked for \$10 million, and I wanted it from the Department of Administration."

Hixon said the department had a \$98 million increase in its 2015-2016 budget, and thought they "ought to be able to spare \$10 million to help counties."

When Hixon stepped to the floor Wednesday, he asked for any other members to stand with him if they too were impacted by the storm.

"They all got up and stood next to me – it was awesome," Hixon said. "That's never been done before, and it really showed we had a ton of support."

Opponents of the amendment said Wednesday the proposal threw the budget out of balance and rather than reflecting actual costs, it reflected estimated costs,

according to the Associated Press.

Although it's been a little more than a year since Winter Storm Pax dropped more than one inch of ice onto Aiken County, conversations have continued to brew in local government about the lack of a state match for ice storm emergency and recovery expenses. Aiken County spent a total of about \$33.2 million to pick up more than 1 million cubic yards of debris, clean up debris and enact recovery and emergency services after the ice storm, according to County Administrator Clay Killian.

To date, the County has received federal reimbursement of nearly \$22 million out of the expected \$27 million from FEMA. That now leaves the County paying about \$6.1 million out of pocket. The City of Aiken spent a little more than \$2 million, and

today has received just about \$1.8 million, Assistant City Manager Stuart Bedenbaugh told the *Aiken Standard*.

South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley asked the General Assembly last May to send counties about \$16 million. That allocation never made it into the current budget. Haley's Press Secretary Chaney Adams told the *Aiken Standard* earlier this week that the governor would, however, support matching storm expenses in the upcoming budget.

Hixon said the budget likely will be passed over to the Senate soon, allowing the House to have time to work on final numbers.



SUBMITTED PHOTO BY THE S.C. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Surrounded by other South Carolina House members whose districts were impacted by the February 2014 ice storm, S.C. Rep. Bill Hixon, R-North Augusta, proposed an amendment Wednesday to pull \$10 million from the Department of Administration to cover the local governments' expenses.