

Title: **'Full plate' awaits lawmakers returning Tuesday**
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'Full plate' awaits lawmakers returning Tuesday

TIM SMITH

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COLUMBIA - When legislators return to work Tuesday, they will be greeted by a surplus of almost \$1.3 billion, a desire to put the long-standing issues of roads and rural schools behind them and optimism that they can accomplish great things in an election year.

But they will also face funding requests almost double the surplus, demands from citizens and the business community that they finally pass bills dealing with infrastructure funding and education reform and a Senate that one

member describes as "the most divided it's ever been."

Lawmakers must also sort through a bevy of issues before their June adjournment, from abortion to judicial reform, changes to the state's pension system, restructuring the state Department of Transportation, strengthening dam inspections, flood relief, ethics reform and even moped safety.

"We've got a full plate this year," House Speaker Jay Lucas said.

Not that 2015 was any less challenging.

Lawmakers went into extra innings to pass a budget last year, voted after intense debate to lower the Confederate flag, passed legislation to battle domestic violence, passed legislation to require body worn cameras on police and buried one of their own when a gunman shot to death eight black parishioners and state

See LEGISLATURE, Page 4A

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Legislature

Continued from Page 1A

Sen. Clementa Pinckney.

State economists late last year projected a financial boon for lawmakers, a mixture of surplus monies and revenue growth totaling \$1.3 billion.

But state agencies have already requested \$2.1 billion in additional money, officials said, including a request for almost 900 more full-time workers, and a variety of issues await to soak up whatever money is available, from flood relief to state pension fund help to state employee health insurance and education funding reform.

Senate Majority Leader Harvey Peeler said it is as if officials "dropped about \$1.3 billion in the trough and yelled 'Sooie!'"

The agencies' requests include \$1 billion for higher education, most of which is for various maintenance and building projects; \$317 million for healthcare, including \$129 million more for Medicaid costs; and \$163 million for law enforcement and criminal justice agencies.

Healthcare and law enforcement agencies have asked for the most new manpower, more than 700 new full-time workers.

The courts also have asked for raises for judges totaling 21 percent over three years.

And those requests do not include fully funding local government aid, a price tag of more

than \$100 million, or bringing the base student cost up to full formula funding, which would cost \$684 million.

Rep. Gary Simrill, a Rock Hill Republican on the House Ways and Means Committee, says even with all those requests, the Legislature this year should consider tax reform and tax relief, one of the goals of the House GOP caucus.

"We have an opportunity now

to send money back," he said.

Senate Majority Leader Harvey Peeler says that the first priority should be road funding.

Sen. Tom Davis, a Beaufort Republican whose filibuster last year blocked taking up a Senate roads bill, agrees. But he also wants the Senate to address past road spending before dedicating millions more to infrastructure.

And Davis argues that lawmakers should fund what is needed for interstate repairs and expansion before looking at the needs of other roads.

"It's critical for purposes of commerce, it's critical for purposes of safety," he said. "It seems to me if we want to work into fixing things, let's start with something that we all can agree needs to be fixed, the interstate system."

GOP leaders say the answer to the road-funding issue, which has stymied lawmakers for two years, is a solution that incorporates restructuring of the state Department of Transportation board as well as some tax relief. Gov. Nikki Haley last year proposed raising the gas tax by 10

cents per gallon but only if lawmakers changed the current system of selecting highway commissioners and approved an income tax cut.

Sen. Greg Hembree, an Horry County Republican, says he favors that approach through a GOP caucus plan that would provide about \$800 million in road and bridge money along with an income tax cut that would total about the same amount.

"The reason there is politics in it now is because DOT is underfunded," he said. "So they have to rely on the General Assembly for additional money. If we really want to get the politics out, it's not going to be about the restructuring, it's going to be about the money because it's al-

ways about the money."

Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter, an Orangeburg Democrat, said the bottom line is the state has not done a good job of maintaining the state's infrastructure.

"So when we talk about remedies, we need to deal with it realistically and not from some delusional aspect that we can just wave a magic wand and it will all be made better," she said. "There is not enough money, whether it is \$1.2 billion or whatever the estimate is, to adequately fix our roads and deal with the Abbeville lawsuit."

The Abbeville lawsuit is reference to a ruling by the South Carolina Supreme Court in 2014 that the state has failed to provide an adequate education as defined by the state's constitution to all students, in response to a lawsuit first filed in 1993 by a group of rural and poor school districts.

The justices prodded lawmakers last year with an order they eventually dropped setting deadlines for a remedy.

A House panel last month issued dozens of recommendations on the issue, including setting up a loan program to help rural schools replace aging buildings.

State Education Superintendent Molly Spearman has suggested higher teacher salaries, a grant program to replace dilapidated schools, expanding a virtual schools program and reducing lengthy rural bus routes.

Cobb-Hunter said the issue of improving education in the state's rural schools is a complex one that after 25 years needs action and not more studies. Economic development in those areas is tied to any solution, she said.

"Let's stop talking about it," she said. "We know there will never be enough money to fix what ails our public education system. We are running out of

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time to actually do something.”

If the state is not willing to fix the problem, she said, the string of economic development successes the state has enjoyed in recent years will end.

Rep. Rita Allison, a Spartanburg County Republican and chairwoman of the House Education and Public Works Committee, said progress on the issue has already been made and state education officials are not waiting on lawmakers to act.

“So while I know it’s been long in coming, I do believe you will see a great effort made going forward,” she said.

Lucas said education reform will be among the first issues tackled by the House. He said he also wants to look at state pension reform and flood relief, particularly for farmers.

Lucas said he is proud of the Legislature and the state’s citizens for facing repeated tragedies and challenges last year and working together.

Davis said he thinks senators are closer to each other as a result of what lawmakers faced last year but Sen. Shane Massey, an Edgefield Republican, says he thinks the Senate is more ideologically divided, which he said has been demonstrated in close procedural votes on major issues.

While many lawmakers said they are optimistic for the year, Cobb-Hunter said she has doubts because it is an election year.

“We don’t really do anything that is going to make anybody halfway mad at us,” she said.

“It’s critical for

purposes of commerce,

it’s critical for

purposes of safety.”

SEN. TOM DAVIS

ON INTERSTATE REPAIRS



Title: **Haley to address US's challenges**
 Author: ANDREW SHAIN ASHAIN@THESTATE.COM
 Size: 32.70 square inch
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Haley to address US's challenges

ANDREW SHAIN

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Gov. Nikki Haley plans to address the challenges in South Carolina and the nation that she thinks are the most important in her Republican response to President Barack Obama's State of the Union address next week.

Haley declined to reveal details of what she plans to say, except to repeat that she is giving an "address" to the nation rather than a "response" to Obama.

"I certainly am not one to compete against the president or try to imply that I could be," Haley told reporters. "I just wanted to take this as an opportunity to express the challenges that I think we have seen in our state but also in our country and the solutions ... and the opportunities that can be there. This will be very much just an address that allows me to talk to the country in a way that I think talks about things that I believe are important."

Haley, the first South Carolinian to deliver the State of the Union response since the political counterpoints were started in 1966, said she will write the address with the help of her staff. She said the Republican leaders in Congress, who chose her for the speech, will have no input in the address, which will air Tuesday after the presi-

dent's address.

"They have given us the leeway to do this," she said. "I have my process as we do speeches. I know what I think I know, what I feel."

Haley's selection to deliver the response has led to speculation about her political future, including how she could help the GOP in a presidential election year.

The nationally televised speech bolstered chatter the Lexington Republican is a possible vice presidential pick. Haley is coming off a year where she gained national attention for her handling of the Charleston church slayings, including her successful call for the removal of the Confederate battle flag from the State House grounds.

Haley brushed off vice presidential speculation last week, saying she planned to be at the State House in a year to tout the successes of her efforts to curb criminal domestic violence, an initiative she announced Thursday. "We have got a lot more things to do," said Haley, who gave a prime-time speech during the 2012 Republican National Convention.

Haley's selection is seen as part of the Republican Party's attempts to win over female voters, who will have

a chance to elect the first female president if Hillary Clinton is the Democratic nominee. Haley, the daughter of Indian immigrants, also helps address a GOP weakness — diversity.

The nation's youngest governor called such talk a "waste of time" Thursday. "I've never gotten into the speculation of what people think or feel, or why people make decisions," Haley said.

Democratic leaders said they don't expect Haley to share a complete picture of South Carolina in her address, citing the lack of money to repair roads and aid poor, rural schools.

"(W)hat they certainly won't hear about is the despair that has plagued our state as a result of her leadership," South Carolina Democratic Party chairman Jaime Harrison said. "While she's smiling in front of the cameras, normal people in our state are struggling just to get by."

Haley said she was invited to deliver the response by House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., during the first week of December — weeks before learning the obligation will cause her to miss her alma mater, Clemson University, playing for the national college football championship in Arizona Monday.

Title: **Fasten seat belts, road saga is back**

Author:

Size: 26.50 square inch

Beaufort, SC Circulation: 11269



Fasten seat belts, road saga is back

A gas-tax hike is still the easy way out to keep the good-old-boy system intact.

As the South Carolina legislature reconvenes this week, watch your wallets.

Top on many agendas will be raising the state gas tax. It sounds logical, but it's a bad idea. It's the easy way out to protect the good-old-boy system that has South Carolina's roads riddled with potholes while new roads to nowhere are built for old-guard legislators.

First, the so-called need for \$1.5 billion a year for road construction needs to be proven. The state says it needs that much every year for the next 29 years. Someone needs to shine a bright light on those "needs." It is an unbelievable sum.

Second, measure existing revenue against true infrastructure needs, including flood repair. State Sen. Tom Davis of Beaufort points out that the state has already been increasing roads funding and has a capacity to do more if that is its top priority — without a gas tax increase, or

certainly with a more modest increase.

But then comes the hardest and most important part: dismantling the current, politically charged way of making roads decisions.

Get rid of the State Infrastructure Bank that runs alongside the SCDOT Commission doing its own thing under its own rules, which favor entrenched lawmakers.

If addressing needs is truly the goal, this dysfunctional way of making roads decisions must cease.

And legislators should avoid the gimmicky concept floated last year by Gov. Nikki Haley. She said that with a gas-tax increase must come an income-tax decrease. This would help the rich and hurt the poor. And the sharp decrease in general-fund revenue would cripple all the educational, social services, criminal justice and health care services of the state.

Davis filibustered for three weeks at the end of last year's legislative session to keep the door open for transportation reform. We thank him and hope he will stick to his well-reasoned stand to address the true roads problem. The problem is governance, not money.



Title: **Lawmakers talk funds for MOX fines**
 Author: BY DERREK ASBERRY dasberry@aikenstandard.com
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Lawmakers talk funds for MOX fines

BY DERREK ASBERRY

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Congressional supporters of the nation's MOX project hinted that they might attempt to appropriate money so the Department of Energy can pay a multimillion-dollar fine to South Carolina for missing a key MOX milestone.

The MOX project would convert 34 metric tons of weapons-grade plutonium into commercial nuclear fuel to meet an agreement with Russia, who also is responsible for disposing of the same amount of plutonium. That goal would be accomplished using the Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility under construction at the Savannah River Site, among other facilities.

Either 1 metric ton of the plutonium was supposed to be processed through the SRS facility or leave the state of South Carolina before Jan. 1.

Since neither happened, DOE is supposed to pay the state of

South Carolina \$1 million a day with a cap of \$100 million annually, per a 2003 agreement between the state and the Energy Department.

S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley informed U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz last month that South Carolina intends to collect the money.

The move was applauded by members of the state's congressional delegation, including U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., who said he would support a federal appropriation to ensure DOE paid the fines.

"I would think that within the budget, it could be a line item shift," Wilson said. "But I support anything it takes to get the attention of the Department of Energy."

Moniz, nor the Energy Department, has responded to Haley's letter, which was sent out Dec. 14.

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., also praised Haley for attempting to levy the fines and for threatening to sue if DOE refuses to pay.

Graham authored the plutonium provision bill signed in 2003, which gave South Carolina the power to levy fines.

"I want to push very hard to enforce that statute and try to get an answer for the country and Savannah River Site," Graham said.

A bevy of reports last year indicated that the MOX program is

not sustainable, which is why other congressmen and DOE leaders are wanting to learn more about downblending – an option

that would dilute the plutonium and ship it to a repository.

Another report on the downblending method is expected to surface before President Barack Obama rolls out his budget proposal, which usually surfaces in February. But Graham has consistently said there is no other pathway that would be as effective or meet the agreement with Russia.

"They have to prove to me there is a viable alternative that is cheaper. ... I don't think they can," Graham said.

Derrek Asberry is the SRS beat reporter for the *Aiken Standard* and has been with the paper since June 2013. He is originally from Vidalia, Ga., and a graduate of Georgia Southern University. Follow him on Twitter @DerrekAsberry.



Wilson



Haley

Title: **An open letter to Donald Trump**
 Author: By The Herald Editorial Board
 Size: 52.7 square inch
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OUR VIEW

An open letter to Donald Trump

By The Herald Editorial Board

Mr. Trump,
 Welcome to Rock Hill! Our city has been fortunate to play host to many presidential hopefuls from both parties this primary season, and now your name can be added to the list.

Winthrop University has been a big part of this process, providing a venue not only for individual candidates but for a televised forum that featured three top Democratic contenders. The exposure to the candidates has been a boon to local residents, especially students, who, we hope, are now more likely to participate in the political process.

These events help energize and inform the community about the issues that will dominate the campaign season. Your visit is no exception.

We suspect many local voters will get to know you at least a little better by the time you move on to the next campaign stop. So, what do you hope to show them?

Clearly, you have effectively tapped into

the anger and apprehensions of many voters, their disgust with the dysfunction of Congress, their distrust of the political establishment, their fears that America is in decline. And you have promised to "make America great again."

But, as the numbers indicate, the state of the union is not all that bad. The nation has seen steady, if unspectacular, economic growth for the past six years. National unemployment now is around 5 percent. Interest rates remain low and inflation is nonexistent. The annual deficit has been significantly reduced. Even the manufacturing and construction sectors, especially the auto industry, are humming along.

Despite the disclaimers, America still "makes stuff."

As for the Palmetto State, Gov. Nikki Haley would tell you that today, like many others, is a great day in South Carolina. Unemployment here has been sharply reduced, and the state ended the year with a reve-

nue surplus. Just last month, Chester County, to our south, landed the biggest industrial project in state history – although county officials won't tell you what it is.

Sure, the nation and this state have intractable problems – income inequality, gun violence, unequal access to education, lingering racism, crumbling infrastructure, to name some of the more prominent ones. But we are doing better than much of the rest of the world.

So, putting aside the negativity and appeals to our worst fears for the moment, how would you tap into America's natural optimism, productivity and open-spirited nature to make America even greater?

If you choose to address that question, real facts would be appreciated. You have a well-documented habit of ignoring them – and then shrugging your shoulders when confronted with the truth.

The nonpartisan PolitiFact project rated

76 percent of 77 statements made by you as mostly false, false or "pants-on-fire." That includes statements ranging from claims of watching Muslims in New Jersey cheering the bombing of the World Trade Center to the egregiously inflated claim that the percentage of whites killed by blacks in 2014 was 81 percent (the correct figure is 15 percent).

We hope your accuracy rate is higher on Friday.

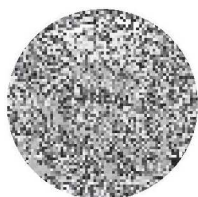
We also hope you will tone down the insults and character assassination. Politics in South Carolina occasionally can be a contact sport, and our public officials don't always conform to the guidelines of political correctness, but we're usually civil here. Good manners are important to many.

Vilifying opponents and testing the limits of propriety might appeal to some voters, but many will be offended. It might just provoke them to look for another candidate with more self-restraint.

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Size: 52.7 square inch
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We hope you enjoy more about South Car-
your visit to South Car- olina and what's im-
olina. And while we portant to its voters
learn more about you, during your stay here.
we hope you also learn

*An open letter to
Republican presidential
candidate Donald
Trump, who is
scheduled to speak
Friday at Winthrop
Coliseum:*



Title: **Officials agree on body cams, split on footage**

Author: BY MAAYAN SCHECHTER, DERREK ASBERRY, CHRISTINA CLEVELAND

Size: 72.85 square inch

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Officials agree on body cams, split on footage

BY MAAYAN SCHECHTER, DERREK ASBERRY, CHRISTINA CLEVELAND

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Editor's note: This is the fifth in a series of articles about the upcoming session of the South Carolina General Assembly. Each member of Aiken County's delegation spoke with the *Aiken Standard* for an interview, except for Don Wells, who did not return comment by press time.

Since Walter Scott, an unarmed motorist, was fatally shot by former North Charleston police officer Michael Slager in April 2015, calls across the country to release any video footage following all officer and public interactions have grown louder.

Aiken law makers are split though on how much footage should be given to the public and at what cost.

Not even a full year after Scott's death, South Carolina became one of the first states to implement a statewide body camera policy, signed by S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley in June 2015.

S.C. Sen. Tom Young, R-Aiken, said he thought it was important the state act on body camera legislation, given Scott's shooting, and with the steps the state has taken since the bill was signed, South Carolina has led the way for other states who are thinking of adopting their own policy.

But, Young said, he does not believe what happened in North Charleston reflects upon the vast

majority of law enforcement officers, who "go above and beyond every day protecting the public."

The law, named for Scott, gave police agencies roughly a year to create body camera guidelines, which were then reviewed by the State Law Enforcement Training Council, made up of 11 state

agency directors and law enforcement officials.

The policy, approved by the Training Council in December 2015, requires all state and local law enforcement officers – whether in uniform or not – to wear and use the cameras if they interact with the public.

The policy guidelines must be followed by local law enforcement agencies in developing their own policies to be submitted to the S.C. Criminal Justice Academy by March.

Under the new guidelines, police officers must document in writing or on the recording itself if they, for any reason, discontinue using the camera. The guidelines, however, would exempt recording conversations between law officers themselves and conversations with undercover informants.

S.C. Rep. Bill Clyburn, D-Aiken, said he approved of all officers wearing body cameras.

"I think it's needed. I think it's a win-win," he said. "It's good for the public, and it's good for public safety officers. I think it builds up the trust, and it helps to bring about what all of us believe should be; and that is we need to love and appreciate our public officers and know that they're there and will protect (us), and we need to know we need to obey and follow our public officer's demands and they're there to help. So that's why I think it's a win-win."

S.C. Sen. Nikki Setzler, D-Lexington, who also approved the measure in the Legislature, noted his effort to fund body cameras for the South Carolina Highway Patrol in the current budget.

Once an agency's policy is ap-

proved by the Justice Academy, that agency can request money from a special fund, which has not yet been set up.

Early estimates for body cameras after Scott's death came in around \$21 million to buy the cameras for almost all officers in the state, and \$12 million per year to store data and maintain the equipment. Those figures are subject to change based on each agency's policy.

The police agencies in the state that have already adopted a body camera policy can be reimbursed from the special fund if their policies are approved.

S.C. Rep. Chris Corley, R-Graniteville, said he supports using body cameras; however, he wants to make sure this debate "does not become yet another avenue" for the Legislature to waste money.

"I think that we need the body cameras, but we also need to be fiscally conservative with implementing this policy," Corley said.

But aside from the dollars designated for the purchase and maintenance of cameras, S.C. Sen. Shane Massey said the more "difficult issue" are the questions about how long do agencies store the data and how long do they keep it.

"You think about all the law enforcement officers we have in the state. That's a lot of footage," Massey said.

Another debate is over whether video footage should be made available to the public and media upon a Freedom of Information Act request.

Corley said if what the body camera captures is a continuing investigation, that material

should not be allowed for release under FOIA.

"The other FOIA concern is that it can spoil a future jury in a criminal or civil matter," Corley said. "However, considering how the media loves to sensationalize any and every story, especially those that fit the liberal media's narrative, most future jurors have already been spoiled."

Under the Training Council's guidelines, data recorded by a body camera is not a public record subject to disclosure under a FOIA request.

Although the S.C. State Law Enforcement Division, the attorney general or the circuit solicitor can request data for a criminal justice purpose; however, whether that footage is released is up to those agencies.

That guideline differs from a filed bill by Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Larry Martin, which seeks to allow police dashcam video to be made public unless officials can make a convincing argument to a judge that disclosing the video or audio recording would harm the agency.

On releasing footage to the public, Setzler said he would not have any problem.

S.C. Rep. Bill Hixon, R-North Augusta, disagreed.

"The law says you're innocent until proven guilty. I don't like for people to be tried in the media when the media gets access to footage," Hixon said. "They should be tried in court. I'm glad we have the video, but I want it to be released after a person has been taken to court and found guilty or not guilty."

S.C. Rep. Bill Taylor, R-Aiken,

Title: **Officials agree on body cams, split on footage**

Author: BY MAAYAN SCHECHTER, DERREK ASBERRY, CHRISTINA CLEVELAND

Size: 72.85 square inch

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who said he champions transparency in the government, and believes most, if not all, public records should be open for inspection, said his main concern with body cameras is the risk of invading personal privacy.

"I believe the fourth amendment of the Constitution trumps

the first amendment in this case, because they have a right to a fair trial and the premature release of police video can jeopardize that," Taylor said. "This is a new frontier, so the whole proposition of having video of every moment of a police experience is both difficult and potentially dangerous."

The North Augusta Department of Public Safety already uses body cameras for its officers on duty.

The Aiken County Sheriff's Office and the Aiken Department of Public Safety are still working on the development of their own policies.

Maayan Schechter is the digital news editor. Christina Cleveland is a general assignment reporter. Derrek Asberry is the SRS beat reporter. The **Associated Press** contributed to this report.

Topics:

Jan. 3: Ethics reform

Jan. 4: Infrastructure

Jan. 5: Education

Jan. 6: Domestic violence

Jan. 7: Guns

Today: Body cameras

Saturday: Legislative goals



Young



Corley



Clyburn



Massey



Setzler



Hixon

Title: **Haley: Changes being made to fight domestic violence**
 Author: BY MEG KINNARD Associated Press
 Size: 19.84 square inch
 Aiken, SC Circulation: 19635



Haley: Changes being made to fight domestic violence

BY MEG KINNARD
 Associated Press

COLUMBIA — Progress is being made in South Carolina's fight against domestic violence, but more time is needed to study the problem and come up with ways to combat it, Gov. Nikki Haley said Thursday.

At a Statehouse news conference, Haley told reporters she has signed three new executive orders pertaining to the issue, which was a major topic during last year's legislative session. One would give the South Carolina Domestic Violence Task Force more time to continue finding ways to fight the problem.

Nationwide, South Carolina consistently ranks among the worst states per capita in women killed by men. A year ago, Haley created the task force to come up with systemic, cultural changes to combat the problem.

In August, the panel issued dozens of recommendations, including training more 911 operators, improving documentation of the crime scene



ONLINE

For an extended version of this story, go to aikenstandard.com

and increasing the number of shelters statewide.

Another order would direct Cabinet agencies to change human resources policies to provide more guidance on how to handle employees who may be affected by abuse, such as providing them with leave and available resources.

The third order requires Cabinet agencies that regularly screen people for benefits and other assistance to look for domestic violence signs.

In the session that ended last summer, legislators passed a law that increased penalties for domestic violence convictions and gave prosecutors more options for punishment.

On Thursday, flanked by prosecutors from across the state and other members of the task force, Haley said the panel is "going too good to stop" and needs more time past the Dec. 31, 2015, deadline originally set up in her order that created it.

Title: **Haley details changes instate's response to domestic violence**
 Author: BY MEG KINNARD Associated Press
 Size: 27.9 square inch
 Rock Hill, SC Circulation: 34688



Haley details changes in state's response to domestic violence

BY MEG KINNARD

Associated Press

COLUMBIA

Progress is being made in South Carolina's fight against domestic violence, but more time is needed to study the problem and come up with ways to combat it, Gov. Nikki Haley said Thursday.

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VIOLENCE

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Haley also said that her executive budget for the coming year would allocate funding to help combat the problem, including about \$19 million to fund new prosecutors to handle

domestic violence cases, many of which are now

prosecuted by law enforcement officers, who are often going up against privately funded attorneys on the defense side.

"I was mortified when I learned that it was law enforcement who were prosecuting these cases," Haley said.

Several professional licensing boards in the state have committed to include domestic violence training in their continuing education courses, Haley said.

Title: **Senator: Roadsplan couldpass next month**
 Author: BY CASSIE COPE AND JAMIESELF ccope@thestate.com, jself@thestate.com
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S.C. LEGISLATIVE PREVIEW

Senator: Roads plan could pass next month

With Transportation Department reform on the table, roads plan could pass by mid-February, says Senate roads-plan critic

Senator filibustered gas-tax increase last session

Other senators not as optimistic, but expect roads plan to pass this session

BY CASSIE COPE
AND JAMIE SELF

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The S.C. senator who last year blocked a proposal to increase gas taxes to fix the state's crumbling roads said Thursday he expects a road repair plan to pass the Senate by mid-February.

A bill to increase the state's gas tax is among the first issues that the state Senate will take up when lawmakers return to Columbia Tuesday.

"There's going to be a lot more appetite in the Senate this year for reforms," said state Sen. Tom Davis, R-Beaufort. Davis filibustered the last three weeks of the 2015 session, arguing state budget surpluses and existing revenues should be used to pay for road repair needs.

Davis, who has ad-

vocated for giving control of the state Transportation Department to the governor, said Thursday the Senate likely will pass a

road-repair bill quickly because other senators now agree that agency needs to be reformed.

Davis said senators need to show taxpayers the state is spending wisely the money available for roads and deserves more. If senators properly allocate money and additional money is needed, "at that point and time, I've got no problem voting for a gas tax increase," he added.

However, Davis said he believes that, after reforms are made, the state will have enough money to pay for road repairs without a gas tax increase.

Other lawmakers were not as optimistic as Davis on the timeline. Senate

Majority Leader Harvey Peeler, R-Cherokee, said he expects senators to approve a road-repair plan by the June end of session.

Passing a proposal could take time, allowing senators to work out a deal on how to reform the Transportation Department, how much to cut state income taxes, and how much to increase the gas tax and other driving fees. However, Democrats

likely will fight a large income tax cut, which Republican Gov. Nikki Haley has demanded as part of a roads deal.

Sen. Brad Hutto, D-Orangeburg, said the argument that an income tax cut will make South Carolina more attractive to businesses is a fallacy. "It would be a radical tax policy to give that much money back to the most

well-to-do in this state, and to the point that it's a competition (among states for new industries) — Boeing, Volvo, BMW, the tire companies — they're all here. They didn't look at our 7 percent (state income tax rate) and go somewhere else."

When fully enacted, the roads-and-tax-cut plan put forward by Senate Republicans would save the state's highest-earning taxpayers — those who make more than \$2 million in taxable income — an average of \$62,066 a year, according to projections by the state Revenue and Fiscal Affairs office.

Meanwhile, 1.1 million S.C. residents would not get any tax cut because they do not earn enough to pay income taxes. That includes the working poor and some retirees, who

Title: **Senator: Roadsplan could pass next month**

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would pay higher gas taxes and fees related to driving a vehicle.

If lawmakers try to enact a tax plan that heavily favors the wealthiest taxpayers, "then we're not going to pass anything," Hutto said.

Lawmakers also spec-

ulated on whether the March 30 deadline to file for the June primaries would impede passing a roads bill.

State Sen. Thomas McElveen, D-Sumter, said pressure from the business community will force

lawmakers to act early. But Hutto said some

lawmakers will be reluctant to vote to raise the gas tax before they know whether they will face primary opposition.

Senate Republican leader Peeler said voting for a road-repair proposal could cut both ways on Election Day. "People will vote

against you if you vote for a gas-tax increase, and they'll vote against you if you don't fix their roads."

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2016's key legislative dates

Jan. 12: First day of session

March 30: Filing deadline for primary races for all seats in the Legislature

May 1: Crossover deadline for bills that have not passed either the House or Senate to be considered this year

June 2: Last day of session

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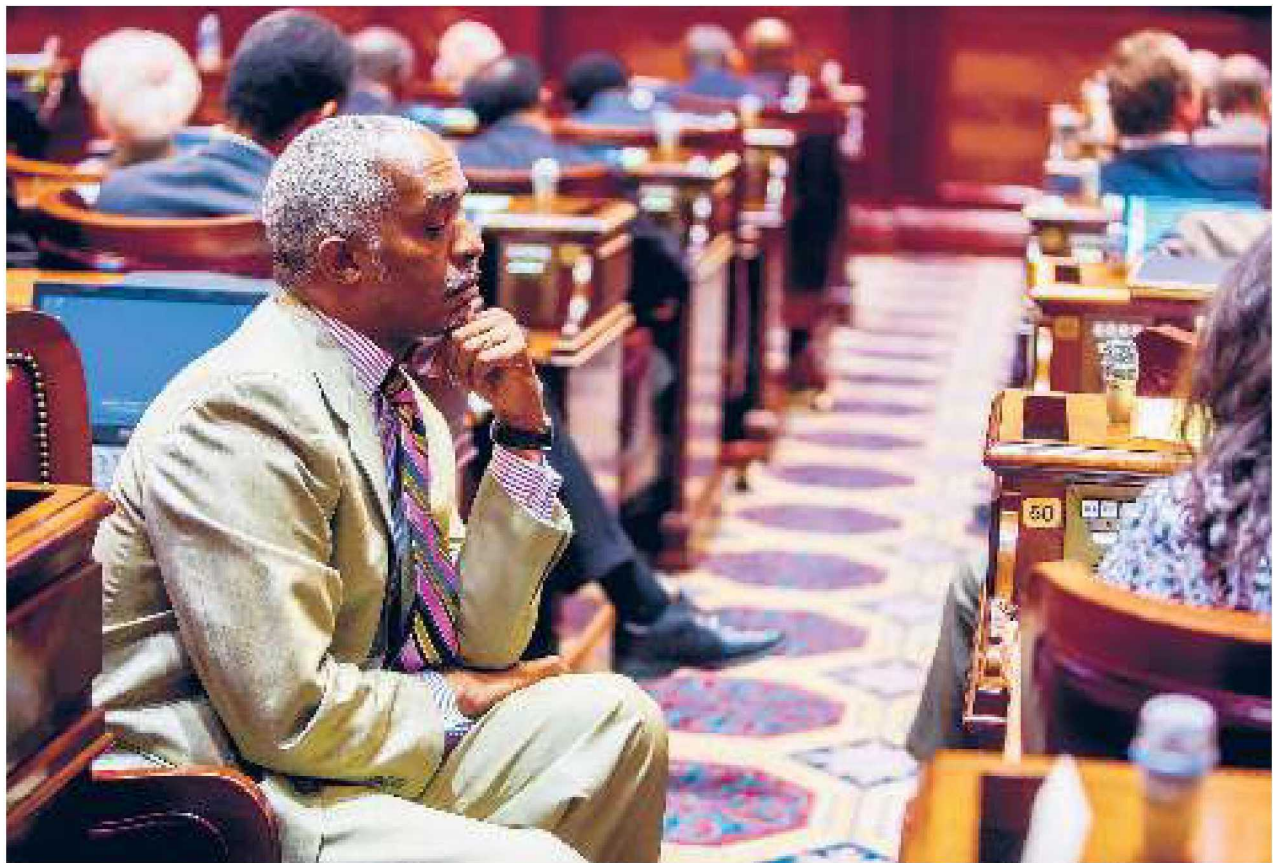
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THE STATE FILE PHOTOGRAPH

Karen Longstreet, center, David Longstreet, left, and Katie Parham take a moment as the House Judiciary committee votes on Emma's Law in 2014.

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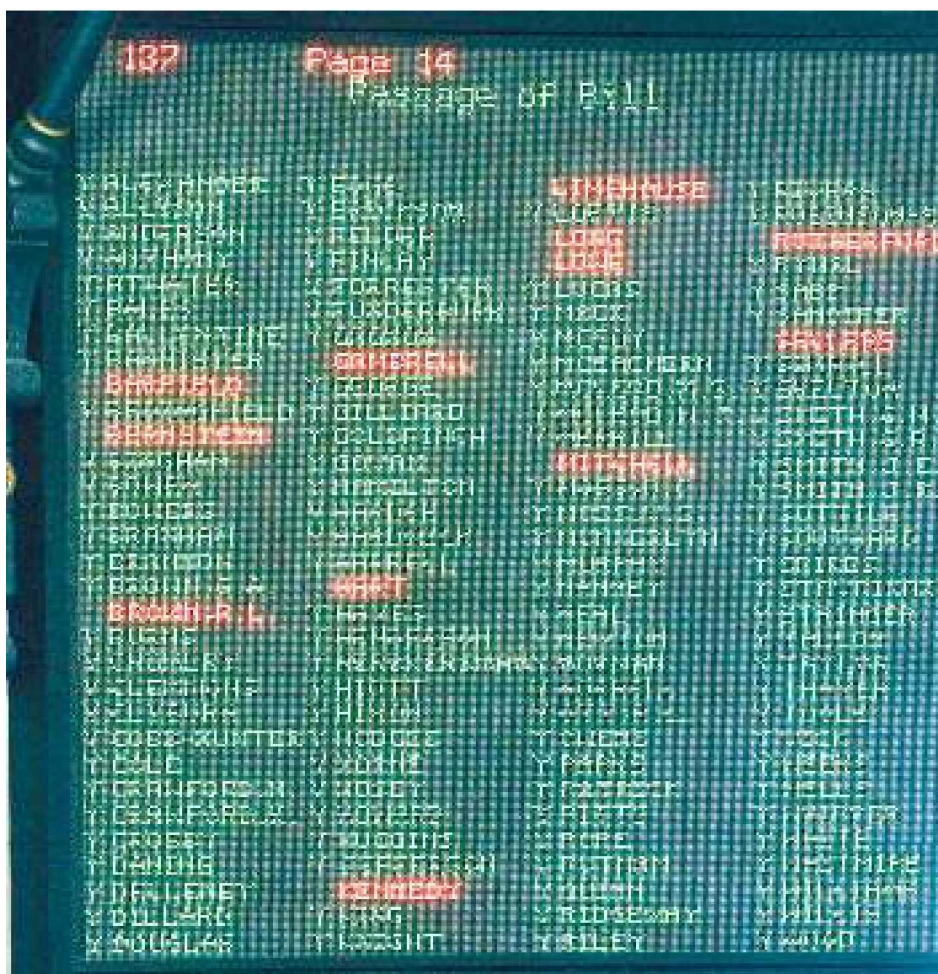
S.C. Rep. Terry Alexander listens as votes are cast in the General Assembly at the Statehouse in 2014.

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THE STATE FILE PHOTOGRAPH

All House members in attendance voted in favor of passing Emma's Law in 2014.

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PRESIDENTIAL STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

Haley setting her own agenda in response

National address is a chance to share what she thinks is important, Republican says

Haley says she is writing the address with her staff

BY ANDREW SHAIN
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COLUMBIA

Gov. Nikki Haley said Thursday she plans to address the challenges in South Carolina and the nation that she thinks are the most important in her Republican response to President Barack Obama's State of the Union address next week.

Haley declined to reveal details of what she plans to say, except to repeat that she is giving an "address" to the nation rather a "response" to Obama.

"I certainly am not one to compete against the president or try to imply



Haley

that I could be," Haley told reporters. "I just wanted to take this as an opportunity to express the

challenges that I think we have seen in our state but also in our country and the solutions ... and the opportunities that can be there.

"This will be very much just an address that allows me to talk to the country in a way that I think talks about things that I believe are important."

Haley, the first South Carolinian to deliver the State of the Union response since the political

counterpoints were started in 1966, said she will write the address with the help of her staff. She said the Republican leaders in Congress, who chose her for the speech, will have no input in the address, which will air Tuesday after the president's address.

"They have given us the leeway to do this," she said. "I have my process as we do speeches. I know what I think I know, what I feel."

Haley's selection to deliver the response has led to speculation about her political future, including how she could help the GOP in a presidential election year.

The nationally televised speech bolstered chatter the Lexington Republican is a possible vice presidential pick. Haley is coming off a year where she gained national attention

for her handling of the Charleston church slayings, including her successful call for the removal of the Confederate battle flag from the Statehouse grounds.

Haley brushed off vice presidential speculation Thursday, saying she planned to be at the Statehouse in a year to tout the successes of her efforts to curb criminal domestic violence, an initiative she announced Thursday. "We have got a lot more things to do," said Haley, who gave a prime-time speech during the 2012 Republican National Convention.

Democratic leaders said they don't expect Haley to share a complete picture of South Carolina in her address, citing the lack of money to repair roads and aid poor, rural schools.

"(W)hat they certainly won't hear about is the despair that has plagued our state as a result of her leadership," S.C. Democratic Party chairman Jaime Harrison said. "While she's smiling in front of the cameras, normal people in our state are struggling just to get by."