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Dark picture painted for Alabama courts, public safety agencies at General Fund hearings

Alabama's court system will slash nearly 400 jobs next year without more General Fund (GF) support, judicial officials said Wednesday during GF budget hearings in Montgomery. Leaders of Alabama's prisons and state troopers also detailed their strapped agencies' struggles to meet growing needs amid years of flat or declining revenues.

Courts: Fighting just to remain at an 'insufficient' level

The state's courts need an additional \$15.2 million next year to avoid 366 job cuts, Chief Justice Roy Moore told lawmakers Wednesday. That money would allow the judiciary "just to stay where we are, which is insufficient," Moore said. The court system requested \$95.9 million in GF money next year. That would be \$16.5 million, or 20.8 percent, more than it would receive under [Gov. Robert Bentley's proposed fiscal year \(FY\) 2014 GF budget](#).

Budget woes have been a perennial challenge for Alabama's courts, which have 422 fewer employees than in 2010. Moore, who was the state's chief justice before a state ethics panel ousted him in 2003 for defying a federal court order, won another term in the office last year. Upon his return, Moore said, the fiscal picture looked even worse than it did when he left. "It was an inadequate budget then, and some 12 years later, it's \$40 million less," Moore said.

Much of the anticipated court funding shortfall stems from lower-than-expected fee collections. The [court fee increase that lawmakers approved last year](#) has failed thus far to live up to revenue forecasts, said Rich Hobson, director of the state Administrative Office of Courts. The fees are on pace to generate about \$12 million a year for courts, Hobson said, well below the \$25 million that lawmakers expected. Courts will continue trying to collect those fees, but the judiciary needs another funding stream, Moore said. "The recession has hurt everybody, and keeping it going on poor people is not the solution," Moore said.

Funding cuts have left county clerks' offices severely understaffed, Hobson said, and many are closed to the public for several hours during the workweek to catch up on backlogged work. Hobson read a few letters from circuit clerks, including one from a clerk who wrote that her office had more full-time employees in 1989 than it does now. To get clerks and other court functions closer to adequate staffing levels, Hobson said, courts would need another \$22 million on top of the \$15.2 million they requested.

Prisons: ‘Treading water’ at almost double capacity

Alabama’s severely overcrowded prison system will seek a \$20.3 million, or 5.4 percent, increase in GF funding next year, Corrections Commissioner Kim Thomas said Wednesday. That money would allow the department to hire 100 new correctional officers, cover growing health care and benefit costs, and pay for needed upgrades at women’s prisons, Thomas said.

State prisons are at 190 percent of their designed capacity, with 11 inmates per correctional officer. The additional \$20.3 million would begin to chip away at an increasingly untenable status quo, Thomas said. “I feel like I’m in the ocean, the seas are stormy, I’m treading water,” he said. “I can do it for a little while, but I can’t forever.”

The corrections system will have \$372.8 million in available GF money this year, down from \$380.9 million last year. This year’s figure includes \$7.3 million rolled forward from FY 2012 but does not account for \$12 million in savings from a new contract for inmate health care, Thomas said.

State troopers: Older cars, fewer miles

Funding cuts in recent years have left the Department of Public Safety (DPS) with fewer employees and an aging vehicle fleet, DPS director Col. Hugh McCall said Wednesday. The department urged lawmakers to provide \$64.4 million in GF money next year, up 19.7 percent from the \$53.8 million that the agency would receive under Bentley’s budget. That amount still would be sharply below the department’s \$86 million GF allocation in FY 2008.

DPS employs 237 fewer people than in 2008, McCall said, including 100 fewer arresting officers. Nearly 70 percent of Alabama’s state troopers drive cars with more than 100,000 miles on the odometer, McCall said, and higher fuel costs have led DPS to reduce miles driven by 38 percent in the last two years. DPS historically used \$3.5 million in state road and bridge funds to buy new vehicles, McCall said, but amid rising prices, the agency now uses that money to buy gas instead.

Lawmaker turnout for state budget hearings is often low, and Wednesday’s final round of GF hearings was no different. Fewer than 10 of Alabama’s 138 current legislators attended any portion. The Legislature will return Thursday for its ninth of 30 allowable meeting days during the 2013 regular session.

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