

# FINE GEDDIE

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

## THE FINE GEDDIE REPORT 2022 Regular Session Preview January 7, 2022

The Alabama Legislature will convene for the 2022 Regular Legislative Session on Tuesday, January 11. Because we are in an election cycle, lawmakers meet earlier this year. The primary election is May 24.

When the House of Representatives and Senate get to Montgomery on Tuesday, their first priority will be distribution of the federal American Rescue Plan (ARP) Funds. The state has been allocated approximately \$2.1 billion of these federal Covid relief funds. The state has received half of the funds and previously appropriated \$480 million of it to prisons, hospitals and nursing homes. Legislators are expected to appropriate the remaining \$580 million from the first tranche in January. To direct focus on those deliberations, Governor Ivey is expected to call a special legislative session once the regular session is underway and the Legislature will likely recess the regular session to allow for it. Such a move would pause consideration of all other legislation while the Legislature deliberates on the ARP supplemental appropriations. The consensus is that broadband development, water and sewer infrastructure and healthcare will be priority matters for those federal dollars, but there will be many requests for funding. The second tranche of over \$1 billion will come to the state in May and is expected to be appropriated in a later special session in the fall.

This week, the Alabama House of Representatives' Republican Caucus announced its agenda for the session. Among the key issues they have committed to take up are measures to:

- prohibit the teaching of critical race theory in public schools
- reform state firearm law to authorize permitless carry with certain limitations
- support rural broadband infrastructure development
- build upon progress made over the last two years to effectuate policy reforms aimed at making it easier for military members and their families stationed here to make necessary transitions as recommended by the Military Stability Commission.
- increase pay and certain retirement benefits for public school employees
- provide a tax break on the first \$40,000 of business property tax, which is designed to benefit small businesses and farmers in particular.

The Alabama Senate has been less formal in shaping public expectations for its work this session. Individual senators have been vocal about certain priorities of their own, but broadband deployment is a consensus priority. Sen. Greg Albritton (R-Atmore), Senate Chairman for the General Fund, has committed to pursuing a comprehensive gaming proposal to include a lottery. Likewise, the Senate Chairman for the Education Trust Fund, Sen. Arthur Orr (R—Decatur), has said he will push legislation to formalize an intervention process for

students who do not meet math proficiency standards. The bill is likely to parallel the reading intervention rules reflected in the Alabama Literacy Act.

There will be a proposal to establish a state healthcare exchange to counter shortcomings related to the federal exchange created in response to the Affordable Care Act. Another bill is expected to allow for increased use of telemedicine for delivering health care.

As is the case with any session held during an election year, lawmakers will spend less time on complex, forward-thinking reforms and give comparatively more attention to topics foundational to their bases of support. In the super-majority Republican landscape measures related to abortion and promoting pro-life policy, gun deregulation, public safety and other matters that are deemed to further and protect conservative Christian values will be priorities. The pandemic has kept vaccine mandates on the table for the session and Republicans have indicated they will oppose any efforts by Democrats to loosen voting rules. The House Republican Caucus notably omitted mention of plans to fast-track an abortion measure when it announced its agenda this week. It seems they have alternatively decided to direct attention to considering ways to improve state policies on foster care and adoption. However, most legislators place a priority on getting home and campaigning for reelection. ■