

2024 Sep-25 AM 10:20
U.S. DISTRICT COURT
N.D. OF ALABAMA**Tide takes the field for A-Day game**

White team wins despite 230 yards in the air by QB Freddie Kitchens. 1C

**With new heart she feels reborn**

New life with donor organ makes every day "a miracle" 1B

MONDAY:
Partly
cloudy
Low 80sVol. 177, No. 108
8 Sections**The Tuscaloosa News**

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PART ONE: THE PROBLEM

STOLEN ELECTIONS

State officials seek to come to grips with rampant election fraud in Black Belt counties

EDITOR'S NOTE: In many key elections in Alabama, absentee voters decide the outcome. In 1994, the absentee vote made up the state's Chief Justice race and a U.S. House seat. In this five-day investigative series, The Tuscaloosa News probes into the election process and the chances of ending stolen elections.

By TOMMY STEVENSON
Staff Writer

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Even today, Alabama's chief justice can't stand up in victory because the election results are delayed for months. Most battles rage on several fronts over whether to count absentee ballots.

In some counties, especially in Alabama's poorest area, the Black Belt, absentee votes comprise more than 30 percent of all those cast in recent elections, and often have settled the outcome of crucial local offices.

In counties where the absentee vote is abnormally high, hundreds of ballots are sometimes mailed illegally to the same address, the homes of brokers who take them from house to house to assist people in voting the right way.

Secretary of State Jim Bennett, the state's chief elections officer, described a typical scenario.

"There was a blank on the absentee ballot form that said, 'Where do you want this application to be sent?' And an absentee ballot manipulator could simply write his or her name in there."

"They could take the ballot and mail it up with 400 or 500 ballots," Jim Bennett, Secretary of State.

But will this end Alabama's election abuse?

Some officials don't believe it. Among them, Attorney General Jeff Sessions and certain Greene County officials.

"They think the law will have loopholes that allow election fraud," he said. "I think the new law isn't worth the paper it's written on," said Greene County Tax Assessor John Kennard. "The legislation that has been passed is not adequate."

Sessions said he hopes there will be reforms, but is not optimistic.

"I hope some of the things proposed will be effective," he said. "But I don't think they'll result in dramatic change. I think all of the opportunities for fraud will still be there."

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DIRTY HANDS

Absentee Voting in Alabama

"And so that person would help State vote out of sight, with who knows what is going on. That certainly presents some opportunity for coercion."

And then, to top it all off, that person takes the ballot back from James Jones and actually mails it to the courthouse, so if Jones doesn't vote they say they want her to, even after the coercion, they may just throw it away."

History is the contrary, however. Bennett believes those days are over in Alabama. A new, tougher law has been passed and will govern future elections.

"In January, a new law went into effect that amended the existing election laws," Bennett said. "Unfortunately, that was not in effect for the Nov. 8 (1994) general election where we had so many problems with the U.S. Department of Justice under the terms of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, that law did not apply in the November general election."

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Legislators to iron out local billsBy TOMMY STEVENSON
Staff Writer

In a departure from usual procedure, the Tuscaloosa County legislative delegation will meet in Montgomery next week to consider all proposed local bills before any of them are introduced.

"It will be a little bit different, but we thought if we all sat down together, go over all the proposed legislation, talk about it and then decide who wants to handle it, things will go more smoothly," said Rep. Tim Parker, D-Tuscaloosa, the chairman of the six-member local House delegation.

There may be some bills we don't want to handle, there may be James' priorities some bills that need some modification, but this way we won't have people coming up at the 11th hour and saying there is something wrong with one of the bills," he said. "We'll all be on the same page."

The regular session of the Legislature begins Tuesday at noon and Parker indicated the delegation, including the county's three senators, will meet either Tuesday or Wednesday to go over proposed legislation. Parker said several bills have been proposed by various municipalities, the county and elected officials.

Please see BILLS Page 4A

Property tax bill may be on the agendaBy DANA BERTLE
Staff Writer

MONTGOMERY — Florence Rep. Nelson Starkey may end Alabama Power Co.'s objection to his 20-mill minimum property tax bill by introducing a measure in the upcoming legislative session to cut Alabama Power's property tax assessment ratio by one-third.

Starkey's 20-mill bill has been the most popular equity funding tax reform bill in the Legislature since he began introducing it in 1981. A version of the bill actually passed both houses one year only in the conference committee.

His bill will be one of at least 1,000 introduced during the 1995 legislative session that begins at noon Tuesday. Starkey said his bill, a constitutional amendment, will require a minimum of 20 mills property tax support for schools before a system can get state foundation funding under a formula that is being revamped by Gov. Fob James.

Starkey's bill prevents James with a dilemma because the governor campaigned against new state taxes. In fact, the first item of James' legislative agenda mentioned on his weekly radio show last week was "no new taxes, period."

In the same breath, however, he says he won't fight Starkey's bill because it requires a statewide vote. Starkey said he would like more than James' lukewarm ambivalence.

"I can't criticize the governor for not jumping on a bill he hasn't seen," said Starkey. "I hope when he sees the final draft he'll adopt a more positive tone."

"It's going to be difficult to pass without some heavy leadership in place," noted Rep. Ken Guis, D-Carlisle Hill.

Starkey is not sure whether his bill will contain a provision to roll back Alabama Power Co.'s assessment ratio from 30 percent to 20 percent. Most businesses are assessed at 30 percent, private motor vehicles are assessed at 18 percent and homes, farms and forest property are assessed at 10 percent.

"I've got a half-dozen versions of the bill I'm considering," said Starkey, a Democratic member of the House. See CHANGE Page 4A

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DEFENDANT'S
EXHIBIT
5**Election process called 'the bottom of everything'**

Win at the polls, lose in the mailbox

By ROBERT DEWITT
Staff Writer

"If you don't work absentee in Greene County, you're a dead duck."

—Tom Goodson
We men in Greene County know what it is to feel like winners when the votes from the polling place are counted and to be losers when the absentee box is tallied.

Both Tom Goodson and William L. Johnson, who have been in the place votes than their opponents. But their opponents had such a preponderance of absentee votes that they turned the election around.

They Goodson ran in 1990 and in 1994. He believes things have changed.

"The only difference is we won this one" in 1994, Goodson said. "We beat them at the polls."

"The people in (Greene County Commission) District 1 were absolutely ready for a change," he said. "People know Greene County should be an oasis. And when you look at it, it's at the bottom of everything."

Johnson had already won one round with County Commissioner William N. Robertson. He debated Robertson in the June Democratic Primary runoff, despite a heavy absentee vote for Robertson.

But Robertson came back to defeat him in the November general election, running on the Patriot Party ticket.

"It frustrates me to the point that I'm not going to sit down," Johnson said. "I'm going to fight as long as I have means to fight. I'm going to fight until the system and legal."

The county's residents were in an uproar over the latest audit by the State Examiners of Public Accounts, which showed the county illegally transferred more than \$1 million from restricted gasoline tax funds to the general fund.

McNamara's belated admissions stir anger in Vietnam veterans.

State's religious leaders target children, guns in Caravan of Churches.

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Greene County sees 20 years of growth in absentee votingBy ROBERT DEWITT
Staff Writer

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In 1974, only 12 absentee ballots were cast countywide in the November general election. By 1994, that number had grown to 1,100.

The first sign of change appeared in 1974, when the absentee vote was only 12 ballots. By 1994, it had grown to 1,100.

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Pope marks eve of Easter with symbolic messages

N.Y. Times News Service

ROME — Pope John Paul II ended the period of Christian mourning with an Easter vigil service Saturday night. It was the climax of three days of religious observance in which the pope, who is usually wary of the opportunities the liturgy affords for symbolic messages, sought greater involvement for women in the church and for Catholics outside the Roman Catholic fold.

On Good Friday evening, the pope made an impassioned plea for Christian unity after praying through the Way of the Cross, Christ's path to crucifixion, with meditations composed by a Protestant.

LAST PAGE

At this hour the people of God throughout the world gather together to keep watch," the pope said in a sermon prepared for delivery at the vigil service in Saint Peter's Basilica. "And while they keep watch with their Lord, light begins to shine in the darkness."

The darkness church was gradually brought to light, bells rang, the organ sounded, and candles were lit to celebrate the mystery that is at the core of Christian belief: Christ's resurrection.

The service Saturday evening was the highlight of Holy Week observances, which moved the church from a period of mourning.



Mandy Rice, 11, and Juliet Satter, 10, don appropriate hats for the Brookwoodbury Bush '95 Festival Saturday. Events included a petting zoo, moonwalk and live entertainment.

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