

COUNTY COMMISSION



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Volume 55, Number 1

What's Inside...

**Maintaining historic
courthouses**



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in this issue

VOLUME 55, NUMBER 1



The old Monroe County Courthouse has been a full-time museum for 20 years. Photo: Monroe County Heritage Museum



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Hon. Ricky Burney
President

Time crunch

The Legislature's changes to the 2012 primary calendar put counties on tight timeline to complete redistricting.

Back in 2007, some folks in Montgomery had what they believed to be a really good idea.

Now, about four years later, the Legislature is looking for a solution that may turn out to be worse than the problems created by the first “good idea” – at least from the perspective of those people planning to run for county commission office in 2012 or those counties that must redraw new lines in an unexpectedly short period of time.

A few months before the 2008 presidential campaign season began, leaders inside the Alabama Legislature thought we'd have a greater influence on the nomination of candidates for president of the United States if we held a separate and early Presidential Preference Primary in February. The supporters of this idea felt if Alabama held its primary early enough, it might generate the same kind of influence that is enjoyed every four years by Iowa, South Carolina and New Hampshire.

During the debate in 2008 it was decided that we'd hold a special Presidential Preference Primary in February and that our local party primary elections would remain on the June date. We weren't the only states that had this idea – in fact more than a dozen tried the same experiment. And, in the end, this special statewide primary was very costly to Alabama citizens and did little to enhance Alabama's role in the nomination process. In fact, the candidates hardly noticed that Alabama was holding an election at all.

When the smoke cleared, everyone agreed the concept was a financial disaster and the state should repeal the special primary law before the 2012 election cycle rolled around. But, like many things, the decision was put on the back burner until the last minute. So early in 2011 folks in Montgomery began

discussing how the primary would be abolished.

And during the discussion phase it seems no one gave a whole lot of consideration to the impact this change could have on the most basic and local political issue: the districts that will be used to elect county commissioners back home.

The plan forged by the Legislature is to abolish the February Presidential Preference Primary and to move the state and local party primaries from June to March in those years when the president is on the ballot. This election will include both the vote for the political party nominees for president as well as the party selections for state and local offices. Then two years later, when the governor, legislators and most other statewide offices are on the ballot, the party primary will shift back to June.

As if this “solution” isn't confusing enough, the change has produced a wealth of problems for county governments. Those of us who have been around a while have seen this kind of thing before. Alabama's laws are a confusing puzzle of deadlines and requirements that are interlocked and contingent on other provisions found elsewhere in the code. Making what seems to be a “simple” change often results in several “complicated” problems.

And so it is with the case of the shifting primaries.

Right off the bat, there is a serious problem for county employees who were planning to seek election in 2012. Current law requires county employees who wish to run for county office to take an unpaid leave of absence from their jobs beginning on the day they qualify and running until the day after the general election or when they are defeated. This means county employees

As if this 'solution' isn't confusing enough, the change has produced a wealth of problems for county governments.

who want to run for office in 2012 will be forced to take a 10-month leave of absence from early January (when part qualifying begins) until the November General Election.

At the commission level, the change will also so shorten the time for the development of new county commission districts that the public will have little opportunity for input into the new lines.

The redistricting law requires the new district lines to be finalized at least six months before any election in which the new lines will be used. The bill abolishing the February experiment and replacing it with a March primary election will likely be signed into law in early June, thereby effectively requiring county governments

to complete the redistricting process and give final approval of the new lines in three months.

Before this final approval can be granted, the law also requires the proposed lines to be advertised and contemplates that the public would have a chance to offer input on the draft changes. And none of these things can begin until the county commission has actually reviewed the population in the existing districts and worked with outside experts to draft new lines that can be advertised and circulated for comment.

Adopting the lines by September will also mean that those persons who want to run for the office of county commissioner in 2012 won't really know what district seat they can seek until just

weeks before the opening of party qualifying. This short time frame will further complicate the process this year because qualifying to seek election to these new districts will begin before the U.S. Justice Department will have time to complete its process of Pre-Clearance of the new lines.

The possible problems generated should the Justice Department reject proposed lines are obvious.

Will those counties that face redistricting get things completed by September? Of course, but in the process the problems that are created may actually be worse than simply abolishing the February experiment and shifting back to an old idea – holding all the party primary elections in June.

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Sonny Brasfield
Executive Director

Responding at the worst times -- at those times when there's no one else -- is what county government is all about

A report from Walker County

SIPSEY – It's not the kind of place you'll stumble upon very easily, even if you're looking to stumble upon it.

It's on the county road map, but you really don't expect there will be a Walmart or a major high school anywhere nearby. It's a place where most of the people who live there have taken up roots near their parents. And, one assumes, never really gave any thought to going anywhere else.

The county road winds through an area reminding one more of North Carolina than Alabama. Steep hills, sharp curves and beautiful landscapes have replaced four-lanes and the signs of commercial enterprise. The striping on the road runs out at some point, but not the potholes. The community center sits atop a hill, in the middle of a curve. Not the place you'd pick for a gathering of hundreds of people. But tornadoes don't understand, or care.

By noon on a hot Saturday the crowd at the center is about what you'd expect in rural Alabama on a cloudless afternoon. But there are no smiles, no children playing, no laughter – this isn't a volunteer fire department barbeque or a car wash to benefit the local cheerleaders. In fact, the silence is almost deafening.

The air conditioning isn't working, so the doors are standing open. Diapers, water and various stacks of used clothes fill one end of the building. Tables line the other end and my eyes catch a familiar sight as soon as I walk in the door.

He was sitting almost alone with his head in his hands. And, immediately, I'm reminded of how we've aged together.

The curly black hair I remember when he took office back in 1996 has turned white-grey and as he looks up, the fatigue and worry of the last 10 days have made the lines on his face all that much more noticeable.

"Man, you don't know how much it means to me to look up and see you," he says, with a smile easing its way onto his face and his arms reaching for an old friend. "Thank you so much for coming to help us."

Most of the early discussion is small talk, but the emotional pressure won't allow either of us to avoid the heart-breaking damage that lies just over the top of the next hill. He recounts the events of April 27 and his role as leader of the employees who meet every morning at the county road shop that was straight in the path of the killer tornado.

We knew it was coming, he whispers, and I thought it would be best for the men to stay here. If the tornado hit the area they'd be ready to react and to take action to assist those in the immediate area. "But I almost lost them. We could have all been killed."

The pain and worry still on his face is evidence of compassion that goes well beyond the duties of being a county commissioner. The people in this community are his friends – his family – and in times of trouble it is his role to lead and to rally all the available resources to help those in need. That part of being a public official isn't mentioned much during campaigns when people are promising to do this or that just to get people to vote for them. But it's a role that hit him hard when the rain stopped and he looked at

the aftermath of the worst tornado outbreak in Alabama history.

Holding the public's trust is especially important when a storm shatters dreams and destroys all the worldly possessions the community can muster. Something as simple as supper on Saturday evening becomes a difficult chore when you've spent the entire week gathering up what's left of your possessions and comforting those who lost what cannot be replaced.

On April 27 that storm skipped over the county shop where they waited, but blasted the houses that lined the tributary that weaves through this area before making its way to the Black Warrior River. The landscape on this Saturday was dotted with crowds of people – some in yellow shirts and others in orange – wielding chain saws and other equipment in an effort to remove the massive pines that had been tossed across the hillside like tissue paper.

The rescue vehicles had long since gone. Two people perished in this community and their lone surviving daughter stopped by the community center to greet others and to thank the volunteers from throughout the state and beyond. But the commissioner couldn't get his mind off what might have been and whether he had chosen correctly.

For the visitors, the mission was to take care of a meal for the workers and the dozens of people whose homes had been turned into piles of wood, metal and rain-soaked memories. They started coming about 5, grateful for something hot to eat and for a kind face and an encouraging word. Only darkness ended the day's events and forced those from Montgomery to pack up and head for home.

Sometime during the afternoon a county vehicle, carrying more meals and supplies, pulled into the lot.

Conversation again turned to the afternoon just 10 days before. The driver was one of those who had huddled in the corner of the county shop and wondered for a few seconds if he'd ever see his family again.

"None of us would have left, even if he had told us to go home," he explained. "But I know it has bothered him, guess it always will."

No, they would not have left. And neither would any of their colleagues who found themselves in the path all over Alabama that day. Responding at the worst times – at those times when there's no one else – is what county government is all about. And it's why the people who have chosen to spend their lives in this arena are so special. And, why the opportunity to spend our career working as their partners is such a treasure.

Continued on page 29



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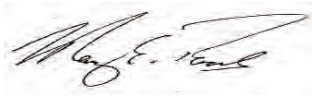
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Mary E. Pons
Association Counsel



Alabama Legislature continues creating new crimes

List of crimes grows with little consideration to the costs of incarceration at the state or county level

County government has always been sensitive to the cost of “running government” which, of course, includes financing the operation of the county jail and the sheriff’s office. These have always been big ticket items, and unfortunately, are frequently the cause of over-expenditures from estimates included in the adopted county budget.

Some of the expenses of the jail and the sheriff’s office can be controlled. However, some cannot – at least not by the county commission or the sheriff. For example, the county jail must take in all persons charged with a crime, house them pending bail or disposition of the case, and sometimes house convicted persons sentenced to serve time in the county jail. The county cannot control the number arrested, who is released on bail or whether a person serves time in the county jail. But the law mandates that the jail be properly operated by the sheriff and properly funded by the county.

Naturally, the best solution to this problem is less crime. There are several committees and think tanks looking at ways to reduce crime and studying alternatives to incarceration. These efforts are applauded and encouraged – and must continue. Where possible, counties have offered financial and administrative support to local programs, but most counties have few resources to lend to these good programs – funding and resources are tied up in the jail.

It is discouraging that while the county struggles to apprehend and

house criminals, new crimes are created every year and existing crimes are amended to strengthen penalties, usually with increased incarceration in the county jail. Naturally, there are circumstances warranting new crimes or increased penalties, but it often appears that the only consideration for addressing societal problems is to create a new crime or increase penalties for an existing one. Rarely does this address the real source of the problem. However, this solution always increases the population in the state’s prisons and the county jails – and neither the state nor the counties can absorb the additional cost or needed bed space.

The most glaring example from the current legislative session is legislation aimed at addressing the problem of illegal immigration. These bills have been revised several times during the session to address concerns of business and state and local governments, but each version includes provisions that will require counties to detain persons who are alleged to be in the country illegally, sometimes indefinitely, and creates new crimes where sentences will be served in the county jail.

However, there are many other examples. Every year, there are several bills to stiffen penalties for DUI offenders. Obviously, drunk driving is a serious and dangerous offense and there should be punishment and treatment for the offense. But most DUI bills concentrate on the punishment rather than the problem and that

It is imperative that this state concentrate on alternatives to incarceration rather than establishing new crimes. The prison system at both the state and county level just cannot keep up with the demand.

punishment is usually served in the county jail. The repeat DUI offender needs help to address the disease, but funding for such programs is scarce, in part due to the money spent on the offender's incarceration.

One particularly disturbing bill introduced this session amends the current felony offense of exposing a child to a controlled or chemical substance by including "an unborn child in utero" in the definition of "child". At first blush, this sounds reasonable. Endangering a child is a horrendous act, and utilizing drugs during pregnancy

can have heartbreaking results. It is a tragic and troubling occurrence which should be addressed. However, by making this a crime, the mother will be incarcerated at the time of the birth, and the county will not only pay the cost of her housing, but the medical expenses for prenatal care and birth. And since most counties cannot afford programs to help the mother address her addiction, she will likely not get the treatment she needs to care for her child or herself.

Crime is a significant problem in this state and every level of government

should continue all efforts to find ways to reduce criminal activity and rehabilitate those who find themselves in the system. Nonetheless, the goal of a crime-free society is not realistic, and many criminals should be incarcerated in state or county facilities. It seems, however, that it is best for society to focus on crime reduction and rehabilitation rather than increasing the circumstances under which a person ends up behind bars. And regardless, it is imperative that this state concentrate on alternatives to incarceration rather than establishing new crimes. The prison system at both the state and county level just cannot keep up with the demand.



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April 27 tornadoes tested preparedness

Counties pull together through mutual aid, relationships to help in time of need

Alabama's numbers from April 27 are staggering: at least 29 tornadoes, 238 people dead and 31 counties across the state's central and northern portions reporting damage.

Sonny Brasfield, Association Executive Director, offered praise in the storm. "I am never more proud to work for Alabama counties than when disaster strikes," he said. "At every turn, county officials and employees have shown professionalism, grace and courage in extraordinary circumstances, and Alabamians are fortunate to have their dedicated service."

The Association talked to people in and around the damaged areas, and what follows are a few snapshots. They don't tell the whole story, but they do tell pieces of it from the county perspective.

2:55 p.m.

The clock on the courthouse stopped at 2:55 p.m., says Cullman County Clerk Charlotte Slatton.

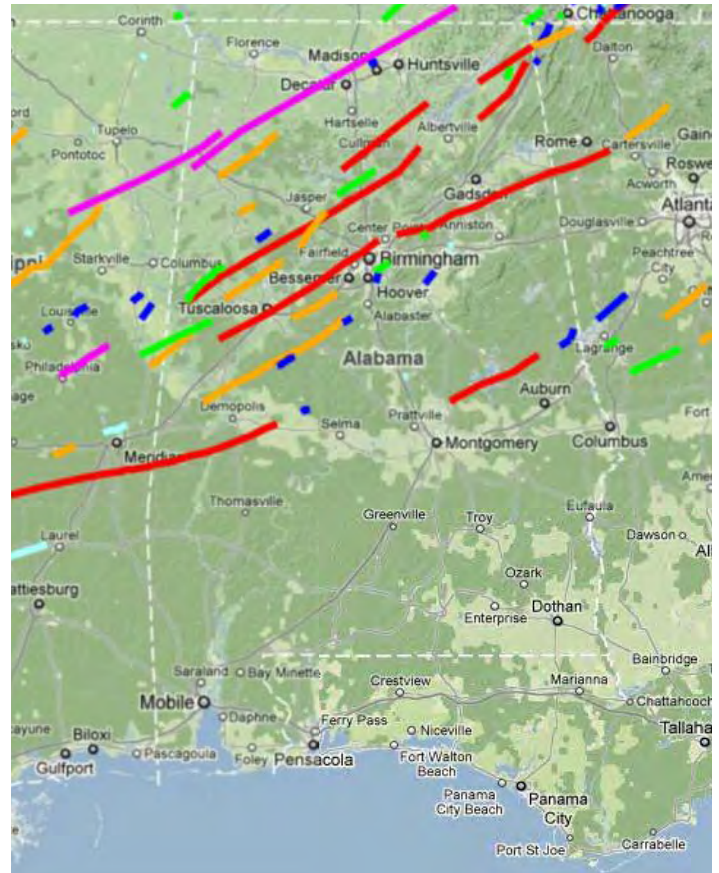
"We were listening to James Spann on the radio," she recalls. "When he said 'there's the steeple on First Baptist Church' we knew we were toast."

That meant an EF-4 tornado was chewing into the church across the street from the courthouse, where 75-100 people were "hunkered down" in the basement, she says. Most everyone who works in the courthouse had gone home, but "there's a lot of the public that comes here to take shelter."

Slatton says she ran into someone the other day who said she wasn't sure she could go back to the courthouse as a shelter. "I told her, 'That was an EF-4 and you walked away from it,'" she says.

The building itself wasn't so lucky. Half the roof was torn off, and the remaining half was lifted up, she said. County officials are already wrangling with the insurance company about whether to replace the whole roof or just half. There's damage to the large courtroom where circuit court meets, and that room has asbestos, so repairs will be more costly and complicated, she said.

Despite the widespread destruction, the Association as of



This National Weather Service map shows the track of tornadoes that ravaged Alabama on April 27, part of a system that wreaked havoc across the eastern United States. Fuschia and red lines represent the most severe storms.

press time knows of no other courthouses that were damaged.

Lessons of Katrina

St. Clair County had two waves of storms – straight-line winds in the morning and an EF-4 tornado in the evening. Thirteen people lost their lives.

For county government, the biggest challenge now is debris removal. Chairman Stanley Batemon said it's a \$12 million problem, and he estimates it will take two months to pick up the debris on the county right-of-way, even with help from the Corps of Engineers.

He praised the counties that had no damage for the way they have pitched in – with human help, equipment help and management help. "Katrina taught so many lessons," he said. "It really caused this to work."



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News You Can Use

Lessons of 9-11

In an interview with U.S. News & World Report, Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Craig Fugate praised the state and local preparedness, crediting much of it to Homeland Security grants made available since 2001.

“If these tornadoes had hit prior to September 11, you would have seen a much greater requirement for direct federal response for search and rescue,” Fugate said. “Particularly in Alabama, they had built mutual aid teams at the local level throughout the state, additional search and rescue capabilities, mobile command posts and communications. And so, while it was a very challenging response, much of that initial assistance came from within the state systems that they had built.”

Friends helping friends

Shelby County sent crews to both Jefferson and Bibb counties. “The damage was just unbelievable,” said Shelby County engineer Randy Cole. “We basically cut our way in to the streets of Pleasant Grove.”

He said the folks they helped were most appreciative. “We were just trying to help neighbors,” Cole said. “We don’t need anything more formal than that.”

Going through the mutual aid channels, Shelby County has probably sent 250 people to areas with damage, said EMA director Jeff Edwards. They have done everything from providing security to clearing debris to conducting search-and-rescue operations. “I’ve had to hold people

back, trying to find them places to go,” Edwards said. “My phone’s been ringing off the hook.”

A family of emergency managers

Talladega County EMA director Deborah Gaither spent a week working in hard-hit Walker County, managing a disaster recovery center. She was deployed by state EMA, and has 15 years of experience in emergency management.

She talked about how the emergency managers around the state train together and work together all the time. “Across the state, all emergency managers are ready to go and help each other,” she said. “I was proud to see how everybody worked together. Though I hope we never have to use it, I hope we can continue to build on that teamwork.”

Though she was back at home, part of Gaither’s mind was still with those in the disaster areas. “Our thoughts and prayers are still with the families and friends,” she said, “and the emergency managers. I’m remembering them too.”

The things that stay with you

Mindy Nash is an administrative assistant with Shelby County EMA, and she deployed to Bibb and Jefferson counties.

In Bibb County, there was a woman in her early 20s. “They lost everything. They couldn’t even find their mobile home,” she said. “Once she got situated a little bit and had somewhere to go, she was out helping her neighbors. I was really shocked.”

Would Nash go again? “In a heartbeat. It’s an amazing experience to go and help,” she said.

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From the Cover



St. Clair County just added a wing onto the 1844 Ashville courthouse, which is one of St. Clair's two county seats. The other courthouse is across Backbone Mountain in Pell City.

Preserving our courthouses

Structures symbolize government, community, democracy

In most Alabama communities, it has been decades since all the important functions of county government fit neatly into one building, but the attachment to our courthouses remains strong:

Sure, citizens visit their courthouse for routine business such as renewing a car tag or paying a tax bill. But the courthouse is also the site of personal milestones, such as buying a marriage license and even saying “I do.” And who can forget turning 16 and getting a driver’s license?

That means that county commissioners are responsible for maintaining a community landmark that also functions as a working modern office building, bursting with courtrooms as well as computer gadgets never imagined when these historic structures were built.

“Courthouses mean so much to people,” said Samuel Rumore Jr., a Birmingham lawyer who wrote a series of articles about all 67 counties’ courthouses for Alabama Lawyer, the magazine of the Alabama Bar Association. “It’s the symbol of the county, and the state and ultimately the nation.”

Nowhere is that more true than in Monroe County, where the 1904 courthouse was converted into a full-time museum. That’s the road that is being followed in Pickens County, where the courthouse has its own fame that has nothing to do with Hollywood. But other counties are finding ways to blend the old and new, continuing to use historic structures through renovations and restorations that add modern conveniences.

The Old Courthouse Museum, as it is now known, anchors the square in downtown

Monroeville, with its 1963 replacement also in the square, only steps away. Later that decade, some merchants protesting a parking shortage began to eye the empty old courthouse’s spot.

“There was a great move to tear it down,” says Otha Lee Biggs, the former probate judge, “because it was deteriorating rather rapidly.”

But in the early 1970s, a blue ribbon citizens committee came together to save the courthouse, and the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973, in part, according to the National Register website, because of its connection to Harper Lee’s Pulitzer-prize-winning novel, “To Kill a Mockingbird.”

For Biggs, literary fame was not the reason to rally around the building. “My personal

From the Cover

intention was to save it because it had been the seat of county government for over 60 years,” he said. “The life of the town kind of revolved around that clock striking”

Today it is difficult to separate the novel and the building, billed as the place to “step inside the setting of ‘To Kill a Mockingbird.’” Set designers replicated the Monroeville courtroom in California when the 1962 movie was filmed.

In 1991, the building became a full-time museum and citizens began an annual production of “To Kill a Mockingbird,” performed on the courthouse lawn and in the famous courtroom, that continues to this day. That year was also the beginning of an 11-year, \$2.5 million restoration, and the building receives an estimated 30,000 visitors a year. For more information, visit www.tokillamockingbird.com.

The Monroe County Heritage Museum’s success is inspiring another group of citizens to celebrate the uniqueness of their courthouse. In Carrollton, it is the Pickens County Courthouse Foundation working to preserve a building famed for supernatural reasons.

Pickens County is on its third courthouse. The Yankees burned the first one, built in 1840. The second one burned in 1876, and that fire is blamed on Henry Wells, who left his mark on the third one, built in 1877.

As the story goes, when Wells was captured by bounty hunters in 1878, he was locked up in the courthouse garret to protect him from an angry mob that had gathered in the square. While he was looking out the garret window, a bolt of lightening shot across the sky and an image of Wells’ face was seared onto the glass pane.

Over the years, attempts have been made to clean the glass, but the image remains. Hail stones and storms have battered and broken other windows, but this pane has survived, though it is now protected by bulletproof glass, said Pickens County Administrator Cheryl Bowles.



At left, a lightning bolt is credited with creating the image of the imprisoned Henry Wells’ face on the courthouse window in Pickens County. Below, Clay County’s restored courthouse features a courtroom named in honor of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, an Ashland native who practiced law in his hometown for a few years.



There’s even a play, “The Face in the Courthouse Window,” that a local cast has performed for two years now. When the script was commissioned, extensive research was done to track down any available details, and researchers learned a few things that differed from storyteller Kathryn Tucker Windham’s account in “13 Alabama Ghosts and Jeffrey.”

For instance, Wells was not hanged, as Windham wrote, but died from gangrene after being shot in the leg during an attempted escape. “That’s why we say we changed history,” Johnson says.

At one point the idea was floated in the Pickens County Herald to take the pane down and put it inside in a glass showcase. “The paper came back with hundreds saying,

From the Cover

Lee County's courthouse anchors a historic district in downtown Opelika.



'Leave it where it is,'" says Dora Johnson, president of the courthouse foundation. "It would not do to take it down."

It's just been in the last year that the public library moved out, leaving the

foundation with its office and gift shop as the courthouse's only occupant, Johnson said. Today the county offices are spread around the square in a judicial building, a service center and a probate building, Bowles said.

Johnson noted that the building is still the official county courthouse – court is occasionally held there – and the county pays for utilities. To learn more, check out www.courthousewindow.com.

It's not easy to say definitively which is Alabama's oldest courthouse, because in the early days court might have been held in a tavern or store before a proper courthouse was built. Some of the earliest courthouses are no longer in use, or they have been converted for other uses. But it is known that the oldest courthouse that is still in use as a courthouse is St. Clair County's Ashville courthouse, which has been in operation since 1844.

Of course, courthouses are where citizens go to resolve their differences, so they are home to almost as many sad stories as happy ones.

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From the Cover



This artist's rendering shows how Russell County is tucking a four-story addition behind the three-story original courthouse.

On Christmas Eve in 1879 local outlaw Aaron Colston (aka Buddy Ray) was leaving the Ashville Hotel in St. Clair County when he was shot, by unknown assailants, in the back with a double-barreled shotgun. His body was dragged to the nearby courthouse, where he died alone on Christmas morning.

"Rumor has it it's his ghost that's in the building," says county administrator Kellie Long. Central dispatch monitors the security cameras, and late at night when everyone has gone, elevators will go up and down, apparently on their own, she explains. An old bell stored in the attic has been heard to ring for no reason at all, even though it was tied down, she adds.

The courthouse just reopened in April after a \$6.2 million renovation with a 22,000 square-foot-addition, and it's hard to imagine a ghost amid state-of-the-art modern conveniences such as voice over Internet protocol phones and video conferencing technology. Still there's a section in the main hall where a Plexiglas window showcases an original wall, built of bricks that were handmade on the court square.

Many historic buildings surround the courthouse, and even though space was tight, "there had never been any consideration of tearing it down," Long says. The county hired 2WR Holmes-Wilkins Architects for the project because of the

firm's experience with old structures, and "the building's turned out beautiful," she adds.

"We're really happy that we were able to maintain the colonial period look," said St. Clair County Chairman Stan Batemon. "The downside is if you've got an older building, you've got to bring it up to code if you remodel. That downside, if you've got it, is very expensive."

As much as county officials appreciate the sentimental value that people place on their courthouses, there are practical considerations. "Historic" is often a code word for "expensive."

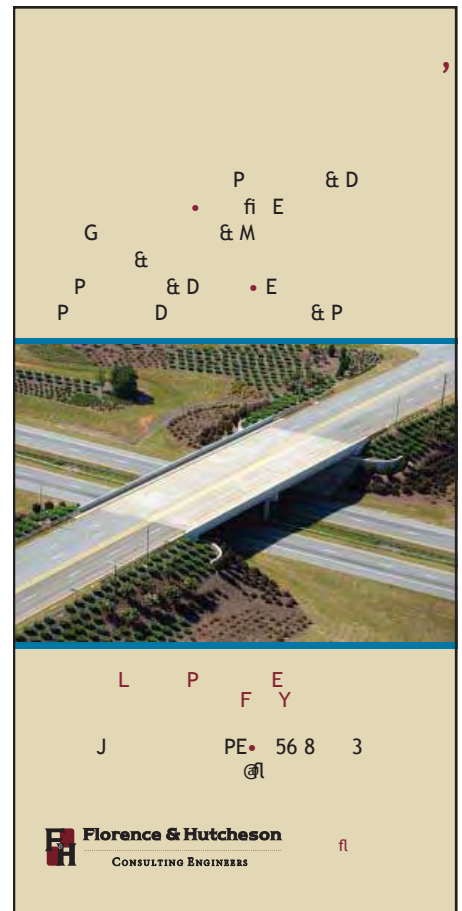
When Clay County renovated its 1906 courthouse, the windows turned out to be the expensive detail. They were restored and not replaced, and it cost more than \$200,000, recalls Ricky Burney, Clay County commissioner and president of the Association.



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From the Cover

Some of Alabama's Oldest Courthouses

Amateur historian Samuel Rumore Jr., who has researched courthouses in all of Alabama's 67 counties, compiled this roundup of Alabama's oldest courthouses. (Editor's note: If you have different or additional information, please contact Sallie Gowan at sgowan@acca-online.org)

Morgan County – Somerville
Built in 1837, this is possibly the oldest existing building constructed as a courthouse in Alabama.

Monroe County - Perdue Hill
This structure was built in 1824 as a Masonic Lodge. It was also used as a courthouse.

DeKalb County – Lebanon
Courthouse built in 1842 and used as courthouse until 1876. In 1960 it was converted to a residence.

St. Clair County – Ashville
Courthouse built in 1844 still in use.

Marengo County – Linden
Courthouse built in 1848 and used as a courthouse until 1902.

Shelby County – Columbiana
Old courthouse built in 1854 is now used as a museum.

Washington County – New St. Stephens
This structure was built in 1854 and is now a Masonic Lodge.

Perry County – Marion
Courthouse built in 1855 and still in use.

Coosa County – Rockford
Courthouse built in 1858, renovated many times, and still in use.

Wilcox County – Camden
Old courthouse built in 1859. It is still in use though the courtroom has moved to another building.

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For more than a decade Clay County residents have enjoyed the benefits of the project, which included a new roof, re-mortared bricks, restored floors and modern heating and air to replace radiators and window units. The courtrooms were restored too, including one named for late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, a native of Ashland.

"We get so many compliments on that courthouse and the beauty of it," Burney says. "If we wanted to tear that old courthouse down, I don't know if anybody would have let us."

In fact, after the courthouse was renovated, the county bought an old textile building and turned it into a jail and office space. "We thought the court officials would move too," Burney says. "Most of those people in charge of those offices wanted to stay in the old courthouse."

Over in Lee County, Probate Judge Bill English sees both the good and bad of an older building, in this case an 1897 courthouse built for less than \$40,000. "It's,



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From the Cover

in my opinion, an absolutely gorgeous old building,” he says. But it “sometimes hampers our ability to expand and grow. It would certainly be more efficient to build.”

Instead, Lee County officials have gone the same path as many other counties, buying up parcels surrounding the courthouse as well as a former corporate building located in an industrial park. Twenty-five years ago they built a justice center for the court system, district attorney and sheriff.

That’s the same concept being applied in a \$6.3 million construction project at the former Russell County Courthouse, now known as the Russell County Judicial Center. Phenix City has only been Russell County’s county seat since 1935, and the current courthouse dates from the 1930s, but plenty of history was made here in the mid 1950s.

At the time, Phenix City was infamously known as “Sin City” for the illegal gambling and other criminal activity that were widespread. It got so bad that Albert Patterson, Alabama’s attorney general-elect, was murdered the night of June 18, 1954, just about a block from the courthouse, says LeAnn Horne, Russell County administrator. The city was put under marshal law, and a key part of the clean-up was a “blue ribbon grand jury” that met at the courthouse. It was also the site of the first trial for Patterson’s murder.

Today the 36,000-square-foot structure is getting a full renovation and an 18,000-square-foot addition. “We are actually really making it over inside,” said Peggy Martin, chair of the Russell County Commission. “We’re so proud of it – it’s a feather in our hat.”

Care was taken to preserve the building’s character, said architect Scott Holmes of Hecht Burdeshaw Architects. “The front of the building, the historic façade, will

remain exactly the same,” he says, adding the addition was designed to resemble the older structure’s traditional brick and stone exterior.

After work is completed early next year, the building will be greener and more secure. Environmentally friendly touches include new windows, a more efficient roof, energy-efficient lighting and a new heating and cooling system, Holmes says. On the security front, for the first time there will be separate paths to the courtrooms for prisoners, judges and the public, he says. The addition also includes a sally port, a special secure entrance for a vehicle transporting inmates.

The changes all began when the county acquired a former MeadWestvaco building a few blocks away on Broad Street. That building, now officially known as the Russell County Courthouse, now houses the revenue commissioner, tag commissioner,

probate judge, board of registrars, Veterans Administration, appraisal and mapping department, county commission and administrator, and part of parks and recreation. “We looked at that as a one-stop shop,” Martin said.

Through careful stewardship by county commissions, these and other courthouses around the state will continue to be at the center of life for future generations of Alabamians, says Sonny Brasfield, executive director of the Association of County Commissions of Alabama. “County government is so important to communities, and maintaining courthouses – these historic landmarks – is just one way commissioners serve the public,” Brasfield says. “The ability to resolve differences in an orderly and civil manner is at the core of our democracy, and that’s what courthouses really represent.”



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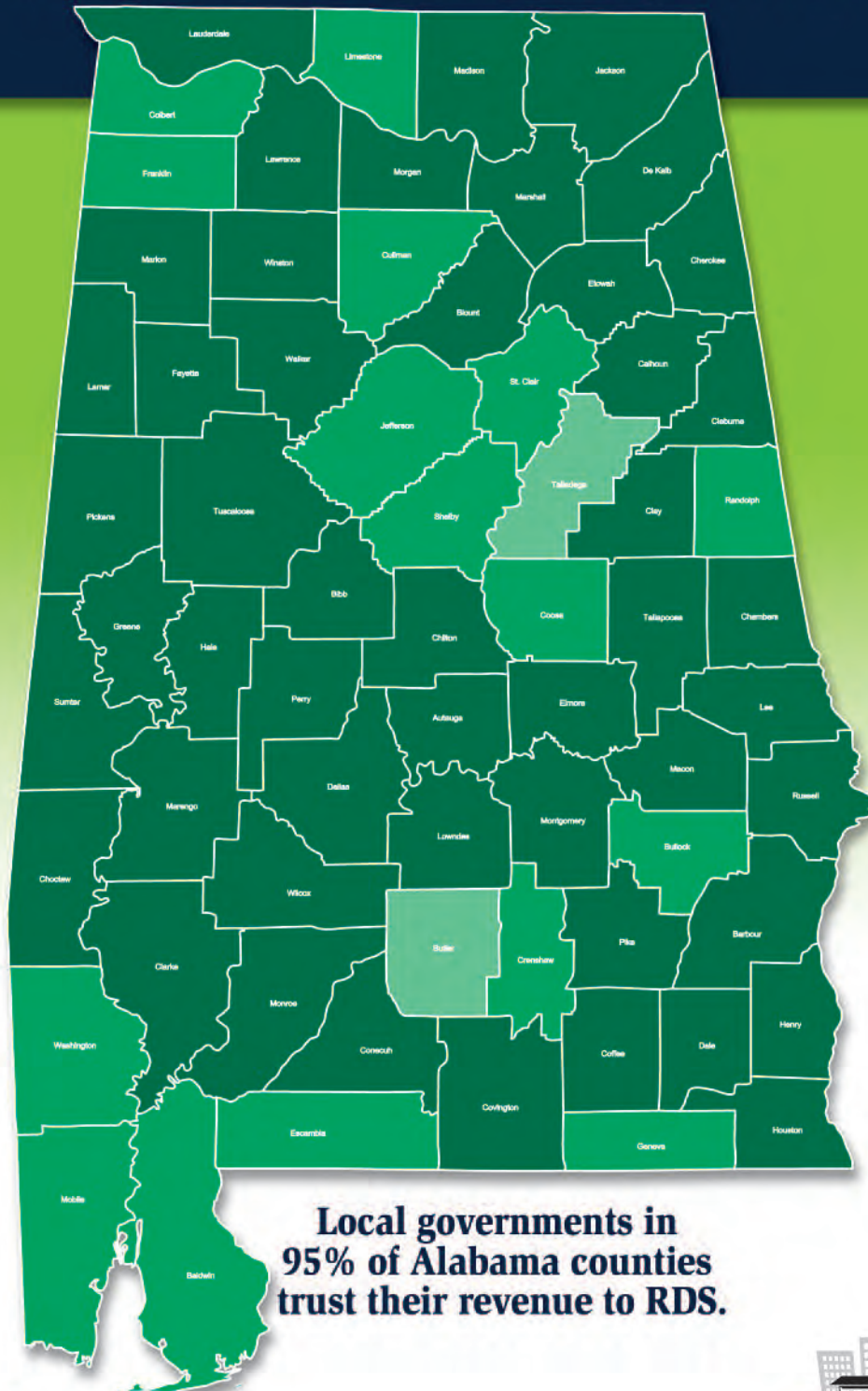
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Feature Story

Sullivan wins top ACEA honor

Wayne Sullivan, county engineer in Jefferson County, has been named 2011 County Engineer of the Year by the Association of County Engineers of Alabama. The honor was announced at the association's annual conference in Orange Beach April 5-6.

"Wayne Sullivan is a leader in our association who is well-respected at the national level," said Richie Beyer, county engineer in Elmore County, who presented the award. "ACEA is pleased to recognize such an outstanding representative of our profession."

As the state County Engineer of the Year, Sullivan will be the Association of County Engineers of Alabama's nominee for the 2012 National Association of County Engineers County Engineer of the Year.

"To be recognized by your peers, there is no greater award because they know what we do everyday," Sullivan said, calling the award the biggest accomplishment of his career.

Sullivan has been with Jefferson County for 26 years, 11 of those years as county engineer. He is a 1975 graduate of Auburn University in civil engineering, and he currently manages a department with a \$35 million annual budget and staff of more than 360. He oversees 1,800 miles of roadways, 315 bridges, 434 traffic signals, more than 40,000 signs and 203 emergency sirens.

Sullivan has served as chairman of the Metropolitan Planning Organization and as a member of the



Jefferson County Engineer Wayne Sullivan, left, accepts the County Engineer of the Year Award from Richie Beyer.

County Planning and Zoning Board. He also has membership on the Horizon 280 and Elevated 280 task forces. He is a past president of the Association of County Engineers of Alabama. Nationally, he served two terms as regional vice president for the National Association of County

Engineers, and he currently serves on the National Association of Counties' Transportation Steering Committee.

Sullivan, 59, lives in Clay with his wife Linda. In his spare time he enjoys golf and "tinkering" with his classic car, a 1972 Chevy.



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Feature Story

Baldwin County wins John F. Courson Award

The Baldwin County Highway Department is the 2011 winner of the John F. Courson Excellence in County Engineering Award from the Association of County Engineers of Alabama. The honor was announced at the association's annual conference April 5-6.

The county was honored for the way County Engineer Cal Markert negotiated an end to a 13-year stalemate that had blocked completion of Baldwin County Road 13, a major north-south corridor linking Eastern Shore communities.

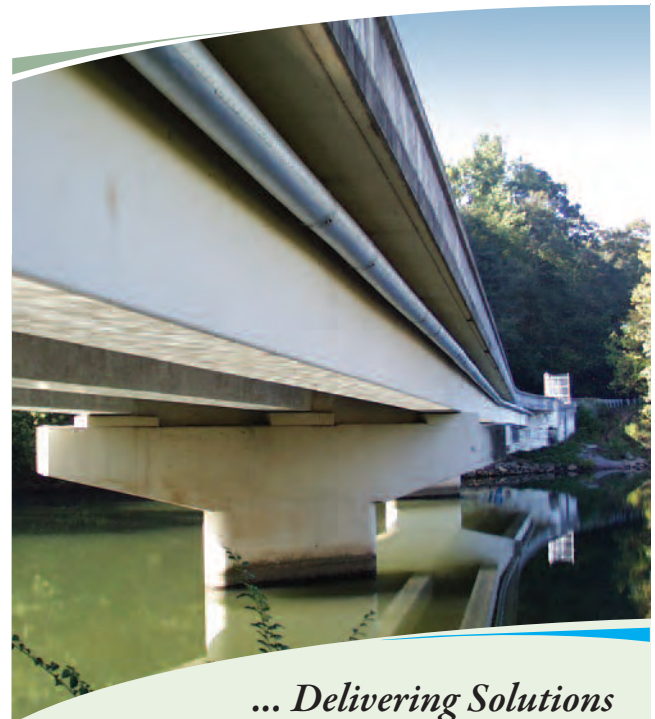
Plans and right-of-way acquisition for County Road 13 had begun in the early 1990s, and when Markert was hired as county engineer in 2005 the road was complete except for one segment that crossed Fly Creek, an environmentally sensitive wetland owned by Auburn University. Because the property was owned by a public entity, the county could not use eminent domain to gain the needed land.

The project faced staunch opposition from environmental groups and neighboring landowners, but Markert was able to win trust and restart negotiations. Right-of-way was finally deeded to the county in September 2006.

"During construction creative and unique environmental protection techniques were used, and on many occasions, stormwater leaving the project was actually cleaner than that entering the project," wrote Frank Lundy in his nominating letter. "Cal had lived up to his promise of constructing the project while protecting the environmentally sensitive areas."

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Forte hits ground running in House

State Rep. Berry Forte says his 28 years on the Barbour County Commission helped prepare him for his newest challenge – serving in the Alabama Legislature.

“I’m not lost up there,” he says, “but

it’s not like being at home where you know everybody.”

Because of his involvement with the Association, he already knew some people and knew his way around the State House.

“It’s a whole different ballgame,” he said.

The year 2010 was a big one for Forte, who retired from the American Building Company on Good Friday after 45 years as a machine operator. It was also the year that House District 84 – representing Barbour, Bullock and Russell counties – became an open seat with the incumbent, Billy Beasley, running for the state Senate. Forte saw the opening as an opportunity.



Forte’s devotion to **Berry Forte** public service carried him into this new arena. “It’s something I love to do,” he says. “That’s why I ran for office – I wanted to help folks.”

He is an important ally for the Association of County Commissions of Alabama, says Executive Director Sonny Brasfield. “Berry Forte came to Montgomery with a deep understanding of how county government works, and that knowledge is invaluable for a legislator,” Brasfield said. “Rep. Forte will serve his district well, and we look forward to working with him in his new role.”

One might think that sheer numbers would be Forte’s biggest adjustment. After all, he was used to being one of seven commissioners, and now he is one of 105 representatives. But the self-described “homebody” is happiest in Eufaula with wife Lillie Ann. “The biggest adjustment is

Continued on page 29

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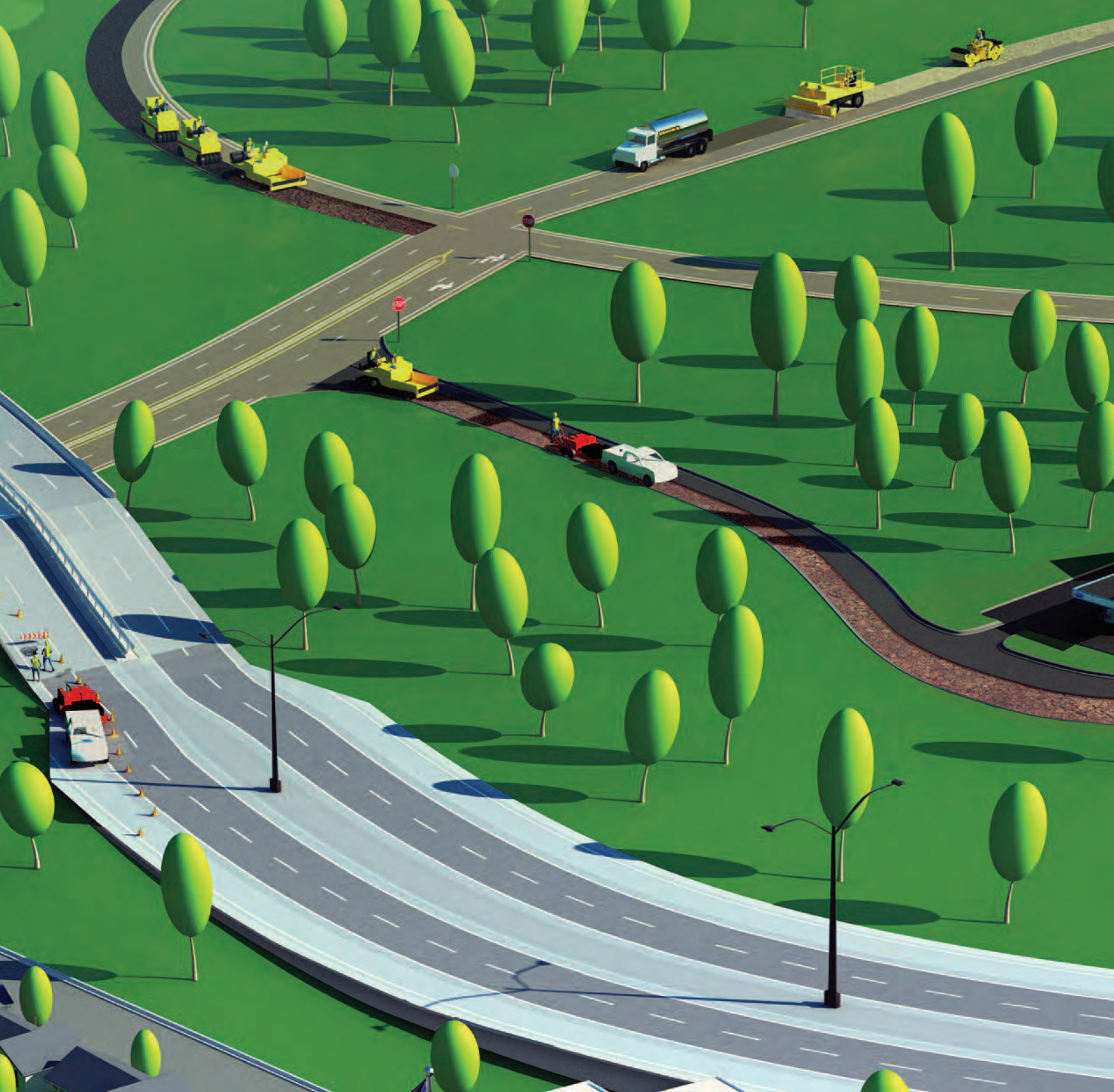
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Forte continued from page 26

staying away from home and family,” Forte says.

His approach to the 2011 Regular Session has been “mostly being quiet, learning the process,” he says.

He seems to have shifted effortlessly to the Montgomery routine, and he addresses the House chamber like a veteran. “I don’t love to go up (to the microphone),” he says, “but I’ll argue my convictions.”

It’s not the easiest time to be a Democrat, since Republicans in 2010 seized control of both chambers of the Legislature for the first time in more than 100 years.

“I’m enjoying debating with them,” Forte says. “I don’t fall out with someone just because we disagree. I can work with anybody. I don’t care if you’re Republican, Democrat or independent.”

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Brasfield continued from page 7

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The notes and the sounds were familiar as I turned the key and the music began to play. I could only smile at the words that put the events in perfect focus and will forever bring back memories of Sipsey, those who worked hard to save it and those in county government who make hard decisions at the most important times in our lives.

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Spanish Fort, AL 36527
(251) 626-5100

Oxford/Anniston
2300 Hwy. 21 S.
Oxford, AL 36203
(256) 831-4104

Shelby County
2070 Corporate Woods Dr.
Alabaster, AL 35007
(205) 664-4833

Tuscumbia
1410 S. Hook St.
Tuscumbia, AL 35674
(256) 381-2771

Crestview
2106 3rd Ave.
Crestview, FL 32539
(850) 682-6510

Huntsville
3600 Governors Drive
Huntsville, AL 35805
(256) 532-1776

Montgomery
10120 Hwy. 80 E.
Montgomery, AL 36117
(334) 215-5000

Panama City
4109 Cato Rd.
Panama City, FL 32404
(850) 785-4007

Thomasville
2501 Joe Davis Industrial Blvd.
Thomasville, AL 36784
(334) 636-0420