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Interviews conclude as RHS football coaching search narrows

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

While there is no definite time frame, Russellville City Schools officials hope to have a new Russellville High School varsity football coach in place by month's end. The position was posted on the system's web site on January 23, 2024, and the application window ran through Wednesday, January

31st. The position opened when former RHS varsity football coach John Ritter resigned effective February 1st to take over the football program at Decatur High School. The Franklin Free Press has learned that 25 candidates submitted applications for the head football coach position and six of those were contacted for interviews. There were no applicants who are currently

See 'RHS,' Page 8

Lauderdale judge's indictment latest among AG prosecutions of certain officials

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

When Lauderdale County Circuit Judge Gil Self was arrested last week, he became the latest Alabama official to be charged with ethics violations and/or felony theft for misusing public funds. Self's January 29th arrest for using his office for personal gain and/or gain of family members, making a false representation to state auditors, and perjury, was announced by Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall in a press release. Marshall's office prosecuted the

well-publicized case against former Limestone County Sheriff Michael Blakely, who was convicted of theft and ethics charges in 2021. Blakely is serving his prison sentence in the Franklin County Jail. Additionally, the AG's office joined the Mobile County District Attorney's office in investigating former Prichard Water Board operations manager Nia Bradley on allegations of misusing a board-issued credit card and other funds allegedly used for trips, lavish meals and luxury purchases for herself. Bradley's felony charges of theft first degree and aggravated theft by


See 'JUDGES,' Page 4

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**John “Buzz” McKinney, of
Russellville, Alabama, passed away
on Friday, February 2nd. Pinkard
Funeral Home assisted the family.**

**Tressie Weeks Cooper, age 93, of
Tuscumbia, passed away on
Monday, February 5, 2024. The
visitation will be 11:00 – 12:00 noon,
Wednesday, February 07, 2024 at
Spry Memorial Chapel. The funeral
will follow at 12:00 noon, in the
funeral home chapel.**

**Reba Dianne Trapp Britnell, age 62,
of Russellville, passed away on
Monday, January 29, 2024. Spry
Memorial Chapel assisted the family.**

**David Lee Wells, age 68, of
Tuscaloosa (formerly of Russellville)
passed away on Monday, January
29, 2024. Spry Memorial Chapel
assisted the family.**

Arts & Humanities Council moves forward with 'Rockin' at the Roxy' without Gilbert, KGB

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When 'Rockin' at the Roxy' resumes on Saturday, March 16th, it will be the first time in 15 years that Kerry Gilbert and his band won't be the centerpiece of the show.

The Franklin County Arts and Humanities Council, which manages Russellville's historic Roxy Theatre, decided to move forward with 'Rockin' at the Roxy' with different musical acts performing each month, rather than having Gilbert and his special guest on the marquis.

And depending on who you ask, that's either in response to community requests or in breach of an agreement Gilbert and the council had to meet and discuss future shows at the Roxy.

The March 16th show will feature the Dixie Mafia, a band with several local artists. The April 13th 'Rockin' at the Roxy' will feature Russellville High School alum Austin Bohannon.

Gilbert's last show at the Roxy was in November 2023. After a contentious meeting with three members of the Arts Council, Gilbert and the KGB did not do shows in September and October. After the November show, Gilbert said he was told by Susie Malone, Arts and Humanities Council President, they would meet with him to discuss plans for the monthly show going forward.

"She told me they would meet with me in February, but no one ever notified me about anything and I found out about their 'Rockin' at the Roxy' March and April shows when someone showed me their post on Facebook," Gilbert said.

"We had a really good thing that lasted for 15 years. I worked hard to build that show," he added.

Malone said she and other council members have been told by

numerous community members they would like to see a slate of different musicians and singers each month rather than the same group 12 times a year.

Additionally, the Roxy is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year and Malone said the council decided to have different people come in and do events.

"We've already got March and April lined up and we have some surprises coming. We want to make this year special," Malone said.

"The public has told us they want a variety of entertainment at the Roxy, not the same thing every month, so that's what we're doing," she added.

Malone said Gilbert is welcome to meet with the council to discuss the possibility of the KGB doing some shows this year, but said there was no agreement or obligation to continue doing a show when the council was losing money on the show each month.

"We're still working on getting first-run movies and we're raising funds for that. For now, we're just trying to keep everything going at the Roxy and to make our 75th anniversary a special year," Malone said.

Gilbert disputes Malone's assertion that the council was losing money on his monthly shows.

"The profits above what they paid us were going to the Arts Council," Gilbert said. "The last few shows we played, the council profited well over \$1,000 each show.

"We didn't quit. The Arts Council just quit having us and I want the public to know the truth about what happened," he added.

Franklin Free Press

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'JUDGES,' From Page 1

deception are pending in Mobile County Circuit Court and she has not been convicted of any offense. The same is true for Self, who faces 18 felony charges in a pending indictment.

At the heart of each case are alleged misuse of public funds entrusted to the defendants for official use.

At Blakely's trial, the evidence showed he converted funds from jail accounts into his personal bank account. Evidence showed Blakely eventually paid all converted funds back prior to his trial.

When news broke in October 2023 about Self's allegedly improper use of court funds exceeding \$140,000, it was reported that Self repaid most of those funds after a state audit found the expenses were impermissible.

But the state went forward with Blakely's and Self's prosecution even though most or all of the money at issue was reimbursed.

Bradley's defense attorney has asserted she was authorized to make all purchases and expenses that form the basis of her charges.

Blakely and Self, as elected officials at the time of their arrests, were charged with ethics violations.

Bradley, whose operations manager position with the Prichard Water Board is appointed by the board, is charged with two felony theft charges outside of Alabama Ethics Laws.

Self's charges include allegations he employed his son as a clerk and paid him more than \$50,000, making personal purchases with court funds and reimbursing himself for lavish trips and travel.

In November 2022, the FFP began an investigative series of articles on questionable financial management and spending by the Russellville Electric Board and its manager Charles Canida.

Records produced by the REB showed Canida and some board members attended two-day beach conferences with a total of eight hours of business and REB ratepayers footed a bill of more than \$35,000 in 2022.

Canida and others stayed five nights in luxury three-bedroom condominiums off site at Hidden Dunes, rather than staying at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Resort, which hosted the conference.

For several years, these beach trips also saw REB ratepayers paying for Canida to rent a private chartered fishing vessel at a cost of more than \$2,000, as well as an ice chest, drinks and snacks for their private charter.

Canida also regularly used his REB credit card for ratepayer-funded meals that cost anywhere from \$1,789 to more than \$4,100 for one meal.

In response to an Open Records Act request filed in 2021, Canida provided statements of two bank accounts in the name of the Russellville Electric Board. Even though REB had a third account, at Alabama Central Credit Union, at the time of the open records request, Canida provided no documentation to show the existence of this account.

In 2022, the FFP asked specifically for statements of the Alabama Central Credit Union account and more than two months later, after Canida closed the account, those records were provided.

The hidden account was opened three years earlier with \$25,000 of ratepayer money. Over the next three years, Canida's secretary withdrew more than \$9,000 of cash and gift cards. Each withdrawal came within days of a conference Canida and/or board members attended, or in the days before a lavish Christmas party Canida and the board hosted each year at the Shoals Marriott.

Those annual Christmas parties, which often included door prizes well in excess of the \$25 limit outlined in the Alabama Ethics Code, cost as much as \$8,000 each year, once again paid for by ratepayers. In one instance, Canida used ratepayer funds to purchase a soft drink in a local convenience store.

At the time, he was provided a luxury SUV, gas, a monthly car wash subscription, bonuses, retirement, insurance, and full reimbursement for all trips.

Canida's credit card records showed purchases of designer cutlery, gourmet chocolates, Dollywood tickets and other luxury items.

Additionally, through 2021, Canida regularly paid bonuses, described as 'performance and safety incentives' to board members, even after former board chairman Darren Woodruff notified the Alabama Ethics Commission about his concerns in receiving bonuses that far exceeded state law for the maximum compensation that could be paid to REB members.

In February 2022, five board members paid back approximately \$30,000 of these illegal bonuses. This did not represent the entirety of bonus money they were paid. Instead, they reimbursed bonuses received from 2019-2021.

Prosecution for any payments prior to that date were barred by the statute of limitations.

While Self and Bradley await trial dates for their charges, and as Blakely serves his sentence in the Franklin County Jail, there has been no legal action taken against Canida or the board.

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 **T**he Senior Center of Phil Campbell is under new management. Everyone age 60 and over are invited to come join us and be part of the group. This is for men and women. We meet at the Phil Campbell Community Center Monday thru Friday from 8-noon. A delicious lunch is served at 11 a.m. Meals are \$1 donation. Some come and play Rook. We also do Bingo when we have enough people. There are several games to play or just sit and socialize with other seniors.


 **P**astor Bro. Eric McKinney and the congregation of Crestview Missionary Baptist Church, 24131 Hwy. 24, Russellville, invite you to worship with them. Sunday morning Bible Study is from 10-Noon and Sunday morning worship from 11-Noon. All are welcome to our services! Call 256-324-0179 for more information.

 **T**ennessee River Bass Club is seeking members for our 23/24 season. Club fishes monthly on Tennessee river and Bear Creek lakes. We welcome boaters or non-boaters 16 or older of all experience levels to join. Club is based in Sheffield. For more information, contact Tommy 256-627-5662.

 **T**he Frog Pond Volunteer Fire Department is holding a fund raiser Gun Raffle with proceeds going to benefit the Frog Pond VFD. Tickets are \$10 or \$25 for 3 and may be purchased through Cash App or PayPal. Call 256-263-0825 for more information. One AR-15 and one Glock 19 Gen 5 will be given away. 16" AR-15 5.56/223 with 15" MHR. And Glock 19 Gen 5 9mm. Drawing will be held at the Fire Department on February 23, 2024, at 6 p.m.

 **M**Y FATHER'S HOUSE MINISTRIES, RUSSELLVILLE, AL, 104 E. Lawrence St., Pastor Pearl Shelton, would like to invite you to our weekly Prayer Meeting every Monday evening at 5:30 p.m. Come join us as we pray together in unity and power! Anyone needing prayer please be sure to join us! Everyone is welcome!

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 **B**lue Springs Volunteer Fire Department will host a Franklin County Candidate Bean Supper on Saturday, Feb. 24, from 12-4 p.m., at the fire department located at 3001 Hwy. 75, Phil Campbell. \$5 per plate includes beans, cornbread, onion and drink. Plates served at 12 p.m. Cake auction at 1 p.m., Candidate speeches to follow auction.

We love to hear from you! Please send your guest columns, cartoon panels, letters to the editor, recipes and other creative submissions to franklinfreepress@yahoo.com.



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'RHS,' From Page 1

employed by Russellville City Schools.

The position that was posted stated applicants should be properly certified for the position and successful head coaching experience is preferred.

Interviews began last week and should conclude this week.

Applicants were required to submit their win-loss record as a head coach, number of playoff games as a coordinator or head coach, number of appearances in championship games as a coordinator or head coach along with their complete coaching history.

The application and interview process is being conducted by RCS

Superintendent Heath Grimes and RHS Principal Jeremy Madden.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Board of Education will be February 20th with a work session on February 19th.

"We are in the process of evaluating candidates with a ranking system," Grimes said. "We will submit a list of those candidates to the board and let them make a decision from there."

Normal protocol would see Grimes recommend the top candidate to

the board for hiring, but with Grimes retiring from his superintendent position in June 2024, this process is being handled differently.

"We'll provide the board all the information on the top candidates and because of my situation, we'll let the board come to a consensus as opposed to me making a recommendation," Grimes said. "When they have a consensus I'll present that candidate to the board as my recommendation for hiring."

Madden said he was pleased with the slate of applicants, though both he and Grimes declined to mention specific names of those who applied or who received interviews.

Almost immediately after Ritter's resignation, community speculation as to who might apply commenced.

One of the top names among those rumored candidates was former West Point, Mississippi varsity coach Chris Chambless.

Chambless retired from West Point after the 2023 season, his 18th at the school.

During that time, West Point won seven Mississippi 5A state titles, including the 2023 season. His career coaching record is 208-54, with a lofty 48-11 record in playoff games and a 110-11 record in Region/Area play.

Chambless previously applied for the RHS job in 2011, when Michael Jackson was hired.

Chambless' father Ric is the owner and managing director of Spry Memorial Chapel in Russellville and Hamilton.

A source familiar with the Golden Tiger football program said Chambless had applied, as did Dustin Goodwin, son of former RHS varsity coach Doug Goodwin, and 2004 RHS graduate and former Golden Tiger quarterback Matt Stockton.



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FCCDC grants awarded to local schools, Big Brothers/Big Sisters program

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Franklin County Community Development Commission met January 26, 2024, and approved a number of grants to local schools and non-profit agencies.

The commission, which includes Brad Bolton, Jeremy Campbell and Russellville Mayor David Grissom, meets quarterly to review grant applications. The commission is comprised of two appointees from Franklin County's legislative delegation and a rotating seat between the mayors of Russellville and Red Bay. Sen. Larry Stutts reappointed Bolton and Rep. Jamie Kiel reappointed Campbell to another four-year term.

With the most recent grants, more than \$2.598 million has been returned to Franklin County since the inception of the funding. The funds come from in lieu of tax payments from the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Grant awards for the January 26th meeting included:

- \$1,000 to Big Brothers/Big Sisters of the Shoals for scholarships.
 - \$500 to Vina High School for girls' and boys' basketball gym renovations.
 - \$800 to Phil Campbell High School for math classroom Chromebook purchase.
 - \$500 to Red Bay Lions Club for purchase of coats and shoes.
 - \$1,500 to Franklin County EMA for repair and maintenance of Dive Boat.
 - \$2,500 to Red Bay High School Football for replacement of 11 helmets.
 - \$800 to Franklin County Emergency Communications for purchase of 7 32" HD monitors.
 - \$500 to Tharptown High School Soccer Program for purchase of jerseys, equipment and other expenses.
 - \$1,000 to Tharptown High School Special Needs Classroom for purchase of 3 picnic tables.
 - \$1,250 to Franklin County Coroner Office for purchase of emergency lights and equipment for office truck.
 - \$800 to City of Red Bay Weatherford Library for Summer Reading Program purchase of new books.
 - \$6,000 transfer to the Future Economic Development Fund.
- The next meeting of the FCCDC will be April 5, 2024, at 8:30 a.m., at the Franklin County Courthouse Annex. Grant requests for the April 5, 2024, meeting must be received by a commission member before 12 p.m., March 29, 2024.

Vote **KIRK SPARKS**

**Franklin County Commission District One
in the
March 5, 2024 Republican Primary**



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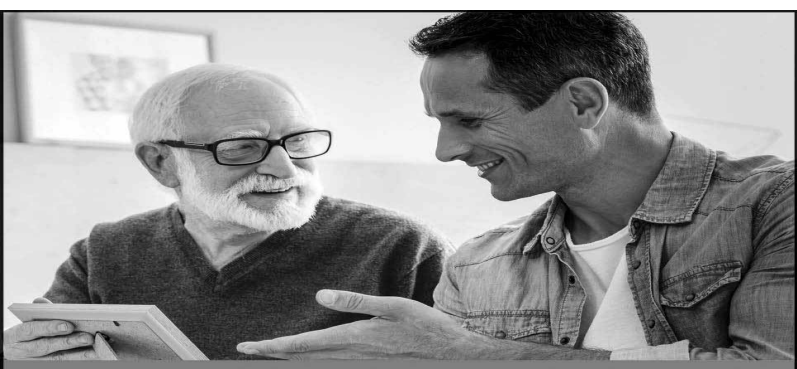
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Belgreen girls roll into area finals with 65-17 defeat of Phillips

Michael Rice
Franklin Free Press

The Belgreen Lady Bulldogs prepared for their 1A Area 14 tournament game Saturday night with a 73-21 win over the Cherokee Indians on Thursday, February 1st.

The Lady Bulldogs' leading scorer was Dacota Green, who had 13 points. Makenna Fisher scored 12 for Belgreen.

The Lady Bulldogs scored 26 in the first period and at half time had a dominant 44-12 lead over the Indians.

The Lady Bulldogs went on to win their first Area 14 Tournament game against the Phillips Bears 65-17.

Carson Hovater led the Lady Bulldogs with 17 points.

Fisher finished the night with 13.

The Lady Bulldogs host the Hackleburg Panthers Tuesday, January 6th at 5:30p.m. for the area championship, as both teams will advance to the subregional round.

Vina girls end injury-riddled season with loss to Hackleburg

Michael Rice
Franklin Free Press

The Vina Lady Red Devils picked up their tenth win before their season ended with a loss to Hackleburg in the Area 14 tournament.

The Lady Red Devils suffered late season injuries including junior Sara Harper and freshman Lana Bell.

On Wednesday, the Lady Red Devils went to Berry and earned a 53-38 win.

Freshman Layla Hester led the scoring with 20 points, followed by junior Khylee Brooks with 11, senior Kaley Attaway with 8, sophomore Braxtyn Quinn with 6, senior Mikala Mitchell with 5 and sophomore Miranda King with 3 points.

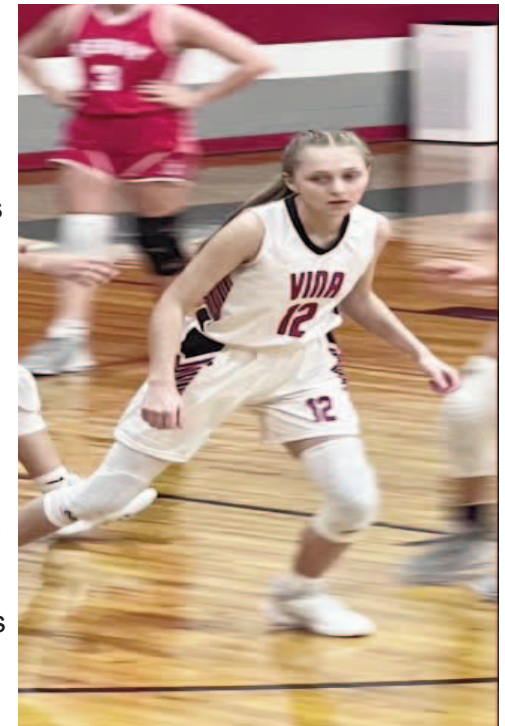
Vina played the seventh ranked Brilliant Tigers on Thursday and fought hard but lost 64-50.

Once again Layla Hester scored 20 points and Attaway added 19, hitting five threes. Other scorers included Brooks with 6, Quinn and Brooklyn McEuen with 2 apiece and Mitchell with 1.

On Saturday, the Lady Red Devils ran out of gas as a good Hackleburg team ended Vina's season with a 53-19 win.

Vina finished the year 10-19.

"We had a good season with double digits wins ,



COURTESY PHOTO

Mikala Mitchell is part of an outstanding Vina senior class that will be missed.

See, 'VINA,' page 13

Russellville varsity boys, girls both earn trip to Area 15 championship games

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When asked by the radio crew what he told his team at halftime, Russellville High School varsity basketball coach Patrick Odom didn't offer a specific answer.

With his Golden Tigers tied with Brewer 31-31 at the half, the regular season champs were in peril of having their season end on their home court in the semifinals of the 5A Area 15 tournament.

But Odom and his team didn't panic. Instead, whatever inspirational words he delivered led to a third quarter that saw the Golden Tigers outscore Brewer 30-12 en route to a 78-55 win.

Russellville will host the winner of the

Lawrence County-West Point semifinal Wednesday, February 7th at 6 p.m.

"People who have never played or coached in a semifinal game don't understand how much pressure there is in the game," Odom said. "Brewer played well in the first half and they dominated on the glass. That was the difference.

"Once we started rebounding, it was over. We started playing our type of basketball in the second half," he added.

EJ King led all scorers with 30 points for Russellville. Malachi Duncan had 18 and KJ Murray scored 16, including 12 in the second half.

The Golden Tigers improved to 16-6 and guaranteed to extend their season by at least

See, 'AREA15,' Page 12

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'AREA15,' From Page 11

two games.
Russellville committed turnovers on three of its first five possessions, but built a 20-15 lead after one quarter. Brewer, led by point guard Austin Holmes' 14 first half points, stormed back to even the game at halftime.

But the Patriots didn't have an answer for Russellville's second half defensive intensity.

"They might have gotten a little motivation at half-time. They came out and played with the urgency we needed. Then when we got ahead we relaxed and were able to play like we are used to playing," Odom said.

Wednesday's game will be the eighth appearance in the area championship game in Odom's nine years at Russellville.

RHS Girls Headed to Subregionals:

The Russellville Lady Golden Tigers won their Area 15 semifinal 42-40 over Lawrence County to advance to the area finals and at least

one game beyond, into the subregionals.

Russellville scored only three first quarter points but actually led the Lady Red Devils, 3-0, after one..

That lead expanded to 12, at 16-4 at half-time, as it looked like Coach Jermaine Groce's team might win in blowout fashion.

But Lawrence County fought back and the third quarter saw each team score 15 points. Russellville took a 31-19 lead into the fourth quarter.

That's when the trouble started for the Lady Golden Tigers, as Lawrence County fought back to within two when the final horn sounded.

It was an ugly final eight minutes for Russellville, as it was outscored 21-11, but the team survived the scare.

The Lady Golden Tigers were set to face the homestanding West Point Warriors Tuesday, February 6th, with a subregion game set for Friday, February 9th at a location and time to be announced.

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'VINA,' From Page 11

considering we started two freshmen most of the season," Vina Coach Richie Hester said.

"No doubt injuries hurt us, as we lost 25 points a game in scoring due to injuries, but we should have all of them back next season in a new area that we expect to win. Sadly we will miss our seniors that will be graduating. The Vina Lady Red Devils should be a force to reckon with next season," Hester added.



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Franklin foster parent class begins soon

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Alabama Department of Human Resources reported last year there are more than 5,800 foster children in Alabama.

That's disturbing in its own right. But with only 2,360 foster families in Alabama, the numbers simply don't add up. The state has a critical shortage of foster homes and it's with that in mind that the Franklin County Department of Human Resources will soon begin its foster parent training class for 2024.

Licensing requirements for Alabama foster parents include the following:

- 19 years of age or older.
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Gambling bill a sure bet to hit legislative session

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When the Alabama Legislature convenes February 6th for its 2024 session, one thing is certain—gambling legislation will be introduced in the Alabama House.

What's unknown, though, is the content of that legislation.

With the promise of the bill being '100% written by legislators' (a plus or minus depending on who you ask), the bill will have the support of top Republicans, including Speaker of the House Nathaniel Ledbetter.

Another certainty is Franklin County's legislative delegation will be opposed to the bill, both in the House and Senate, as Rep. Jamie Kiel and Sen. Larry Stutts remain steadfastly against any gambling legislation.

"My position hasn't changed," Stutts told the FFP last week. "The legislative plan is that the House will deal with it first and it will probably be later in the session before we deal with it in the Seante, if they even come up with something they can pass.

"There are so many competing interests as to what level of gaming you're talking about," he added.

Stutts' doubts are warranted. Each year, it seems, Alabama's legislative session sees extensive talk about a lottery, casino or dual bill being introduced. But there are major issues that must be reconciled, beginning with how gambling and/or lottery revenue will be used.

"The gambling interests have fought among themselves for years, saying we want this or that," Stutts said. "We won't support anything that doesn't include this or that. We want three casinos, or five casinos. There's so much infighting that it may never get to the point of a unified bill moving forward."

Democratic Rep. Andy Whitt has spearheaded a study on Alabama's gambling situation and was charged with drafting legislation that addresses 'every issue' people have brought up over the last several years.

Whitt expects a gambling bill to make it to the House floor within two weeks of the February 6th start of the session.

But the behind-the-scenes jockeying for position was already underway long before that day. That includes the Alabama Farmers Federation, which is diligently lobbying against any gambling legislation.

Additionally, an pro-lottery text messaging campaign hit Franklin County voters this week, asking Would you be happy if you knew your State

See 'GAMBLING,' Page 16

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'GAMBLING,' From Page 15

Representative stopped the lottery from coming to Alabama? Have a voice in our future. LEARN MORE AT: givealabamaavoice.com."

The campaign is being paid for by Give Alabama A Voice political action committee. A search of www.fcpa.alabamavotes.gov revealed no PAC by this name on a search done February 5, 2024.

But Whitt and other gambling supporters say Alabama is long overdue to enact gambling legislation as has been done in all surrounding states.

Another reason cited by gambling proponents is how rampant illegal gambling is in Alabama. With vague gambling laws that are inconsistently enforced, what's considered legal in one county may result in charges in another county.

Kiel has different thoughts about the state's illegal gambling, though, that don't involve enacting gaming legislation.

"The troubling thing about expanding gambling beyond a lottery is it puts casinos in more communities," Kiel said. "To me, the focus should really be on stopping the illegal gambling rather than legalizing it."

When asked whether he would support a Constitutional amendment giving Alabama voters the ability to decide on an education lottery, he didn't give a direct answer.

"It's likely to never come to a simple yes or no vote on the lottery because of all the other gambling interests in the state," Kiel said.

Meanwhile, Mississippi Lottery Corporation officials announced last week that in just over four years, the state has surpassed the \$2 billion mark in gross sales.

And Alabama residents will continue to pour into Mississippi, Florida, Georgia and Tennessee to spend their gambling dollars unless the legislature comes together on an issue that remains one of the state's most divisive.

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