Auburn preparing for at least two years of major cuts in state funds

Auburn University is bracing for large cuts in state funding that could affect faculty and staff salaries and other goals for at least the next two years, says President William Walker. Following the defeat of Gov. Bob Riley’s tax package in Tuesday’s referendum, the AU president said higher education faces the prospect of additional cuts in state funding beyond the 6.34 percent cut in the education budget projected by the governor last spring for the 2004 budget year. Walker added that another round of cuts is likely the following year. “The people of Alabama have made their decision and those of us who depend largely on state funding will have to adjust,” Walker said. “What happens next is up to Gov. Riley and the Legislature, but we are prepared to revisit our FY04 budget and make some tough decisions. We will look at everything, including planned salary increases, and make the decisions we feel will have the least adverse impact on Auburn University’s mission.”

Speaking Wednesday, Walker said, “I do hope that yesterday’s vote and the debate leading up to it have at least awakened Alabamians to the funding crisis that faces this state. We have to do something to increase revenue in Alabama, or higher education — along with other vital state services — is looking at potentially disastrous consequences.”

Earlier, speaking to the University Senate before the polls closed, Walker said state budget planners have warned higher education to expect additional expenses and cuts of 10 percent or more in the budget year that starts Oct. 1. Auburn’s state appropriation this year was budgeted for $134.9 million.

With defeat of his tax proposals, Riley has called the Alabama Legislature into special session to eliminate a potential $675 million deficit in state budgets for the coming year.

In addition to reductions in appropriations, budget officials have warned that state government may (See Funding cuts, page 2)
Kennedy Center chooses Phillips to participate in Critics' Institute

Scott Phillips of the AU Department of Theatre participated in the Eugene O’Neill Critics’ Institute at Waterford, Conn., in July as one of two national faculty fellows chosen by the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival.

The Critics’ Institute, which is funded largely by The New York Times Foundation, was founded in the 1950s to encourage professional development of theatre critics.

Fourteen critics from across the nation met during the conference to write about new plays and discuss issues and emerging trends in theatre with professional playwrights and actors. In addition to the Kennedy Center fellows, the Critics’ Institute hosted critics from National Public Radio, The Village Voice, and other media outlets.

“More than 900 playwrights compete for a dozen workshop slots each year at the O’Neill Institute. During his two-week residency, Phillips will attend and review workshop productions, and he participated in twice-daily sessions devoted to the fine points of theatre criticism.

Upcoming Events

Tuesday, September 16
• Annual Fall Meeting: University Faculty, 3 p.m., Bran Hall auditorium
• Public Reading: Auburn author Madison Jones will read from his new novel, “Herod’s Wife,” 4 p.m., Pebble Hill, Dillard/Debord Street at East Magnolia Avenue.

Wednesday, September 17
• York Lecture Series: Economic and agricultural sustainability authorities Joe and Beth Lewis, “Achieving Sustainable Communities: From Farmhouse to Schoolhouse and City Hall,” 7 p.m., Dixon Conference Center.

Thursday, September 18
• Human Resources Development Program: “Planning for Retirement,” 9 a.m., Dixon Conference Center. For information, contact Heather Hoesler at 844-4143 or vareuburn@auburn.edu.
• Meeting: AU Book Club, discussion of Alexander McCall Smith’s “The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency,” 9 a.m., Dixon Conference Center.
• Meeting: AU Book Club, discussion of Alexander McCall Smith’s “The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency,” 5 p.m., Dixon Conference Center.

Friday, September 19
• Public Forum: “Information Technology: Role of Media in a Democratic Society,” 5:30 p.m., Brum 239. Hosted by the Department of Journalism and Communication.
• Meeting: AU Book Club, discussion of Alexander McCall Smith’s “The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency,” 9:30 a.m., Dixon Conference Center.

Saturday, September 20
• Blue Jean Ball: Nursing School fund-raiser, Crooked Oaks Hunt- ing Lodge, Notasulga. For ticket information, call 844-6752.

Sunday, September 21
• Next AU Report.

Tuesday, September 23
• Concert: Auburn Community Orchestra, 6 p.m., Kiesel Park.

Rising cost of prescriptions cited as threat to affordable insurance

Like most other employers across the nation, Auburn could use a financial prescription to slow the runaway cost of prescription drugs on its health insurance plan, says the plan’s campus coordinator.

Auburn’s employee health insurance plan is administered by Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Alabama, but all payments from the plan come out of a self-insurance pool maintained by the university.

Under federal regulations, the university and its faculty and staff who participate in the employee health plan must pay enough into the fund each year to pay for all covered expenses for health care of the employees and their families.

The university has always had a large enough reserve to cover all claims paid by Blue Cross/Blue Shield and, with continued costs increases, the amount that faculty, staff and the university pay into the plan will have to go up, he said.

Auburn’s health insurance plan pays for about 60 percent of the employees and their families.

The problem is national in scope, Herring said, with escalating prescription costs posing a major threat to the affordability of health insurance.

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The problem is national in scope, Herring said, with escalating prescription costs posing a major threat to the affordability of health insurance.

“Auburn is so out of line with prescriptions as a percentage of total cost that it is likely to get hit very hard,” Herring said.

“With the changes in expenditures that we’re seeing, it’s likely that Auburn will have to spend proportionately more than other universities under the Blue Cross/Blue Shield umbrella,” Herring said.

“Auburn is so out of line with prescriptions as a percent of the total cost, and we need to find out why our prescription cost is more,” Herring said. “But most of all, we need to slow the growth of these cost increases in order to keep the total costs down.”

Herring cited several reasons for the rising costs of prescription drugs. One major contributor, he said, is the discovery of drugs that are either more effective than previous medications or treat previously untreatable conditions. However, he said, some drug manufacturers simply tweak existing medications, adding little actual value, in an effort to protect their products from generic competitors.

Herring said faculty and staff can help hold down prescription costs by paying closer attention to their families’ prescription needs, investigating the claims in television ads more carefully, avoiding the temptation to upgrade just because a new drug is available, and asking their doctors for generics whenever possible.

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Enrollment drops, ACT scores rise according to plan

Auburn’s enrollment for fall semester reflects a slight decrease from last year’s record high, but administrators say that is part of a plan that also includes increases in quality indicators for new freshmen.

Overall enrollment is 23,132, down from last year’s all-time high of 23,326. But John Fletcher, AU’s assistant vice president for enrollment management in the Division of Student Affairs, says the drop resulted from the university’s concentration on increasing the quality of the incoming freshman class while matching new students to available resources.

“We feel very pleased with what has resulted from our enrollment management processes,” Fletcher said. “We think we have been successful in attracting better students and matching them to the resources available in the colleges and schools in which they have enrolled to allow them to get the maximum from their Auburn experience.”

Fall semester enrollment numbers include: 20,048 undergraduates, down from 20,346 last year; 3,104 graduate students, up from 2,930 last year; and 3,129 transfer students, roughly equivalent to last year’s number.

Meeting a goal of reducing the size of the freshman class, Auburn enrolled 3,736 new freshmen this fall compared to 4,103 last year. Those new freshmen reflected a significantly higher average ACT score (24.4, up from 23.9 last year), a higher average SAT score (1117, compared to 1101 last year) and a higher average high school grade point average (3.51, compared to 3.43 last year).

“We made the decision last year to focus on quality rather than quantity in our new freshman admissions,” Fletcher said.

Wes Williams, vice president for student affairs, said several factors led to the increase in academic achievement of entering freshmen. “Good students like these choose a school because of the quality of the faculty and programs, both in and out of the classroom,” Williams said. “Another major factor this year is the leadership and teamwork of Enrollment Management Services and the Enrollment Management Oversight Group.”

The Enrollment Management Oversight Group, chaired by interim Provost John Pritchett, helped colleges and schools coordinate the admission of new students with available faculty, classrooms and other resources.

“We’ve increased our focus on bettering the educational experience from both points of view,” Fletcher said. “By matching admissions with resources, we’re better able to control class sizes, teaching loads and other variables that help to maximize the students’ educational experiences.”

HR to present program on staff development

The Division of Human Resources will present the program “The Successful Interview and Effective Resume” by employment specialists Leanne Fuller and Tommy Waldrop from 9 a.m.-11 a.m. on Sept. 24 at Dixon Conference Center.

For information or registration assistance, contact Heather Crozier at 844-4145 or vann-h@auburn.edu.

Birmingham Museum to showcase AU Rural Studio

The Birmingham Museum of Art will host an exhibit of the Auburn School of Architecture’s Rural Studio from Oct. 5-Jan. 4.

The exhibit “Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio: Community Architecture” will include some of Mockbee’s notebooks, models, photographs and paintings. One of Auburn’s most nationally prominent professors, Mockbee died on Dec. 30, 2001.

Fifty-year students at the Rural Studio will create structures on-site in the exhibition. The group of 13 students will preview three new structures planned for Hale County in West Alabama.