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Gadsden legislator presses Riley on PACT

By *Markeshia Ricks*

At least one legislator is pressing the governor to put the state's financially ailing prepaid affordable college tuition, or PACT, plan into any call for a special session of the Legislature.

But a spokesman with the governor's office said that's unlikely.

State Rep. Craig Ford, D-Gadsden, said he wants Gov. Bob Riley to set the special session for the same week that the PACT board is expected to receive a report from the Retirement Systems of Alabama.

The state Legislature asked the RSA to study the tuition plan after it was discovered that the plan didn't have enough assets to cover future obligations. The board will receive the report at its next scheduled meeting Aug. 19.

Ford said the governor should hold off on a special session until that report is in hand, so that any legislative proposal can be addressed while the Legislature is in session.

"My attitude is that people in my area don't realize the impact of the Jefferson County debt situation, but they do realize the impact of the PACT program," he said.

Riley has said he expects to call lawmakers into special session in August to deal with the financial crisis in Jefferson County.

"If and when Governor Riley calls a special session to deal with the Jefferson County financial situation, he would prefer that it be devoted solely to that issue," said Todd Stacy, deputy press secretary for Riley. "We need to avoid anything that would distract legislators from finally fixing what is a looming catastrophe for Jefferson County and really the whole state."

Stacy said Riley is willing to call a special session to deal specifically with PACT, but both the governor and the state Legislature should have time to look at the RSA study first.

"The Legislature voted to conduct the study, so it would make sense that they be given a chance to look at it before we take that next step," Stacy said.

Alabama Community Colleges Interim Chancellor Joan Davis, who replaces former Chancellor Bradley Byrne on the PACT board, said she's looking forward to hearing RSA's suggestions, but ultimately whether the matter would be dealt with in the session was Riley's choice.

Chip Hill, spokesman for Lt. Gov. Jim Folsom Jr., said without having the RSA report in hand it was premature to say whether considering a legislative measure for the PACT program in the session would be helpful.

Hill said Folsom, who also serves on the PACT board, remains committed to finding a solution that ensures the state meets its obligation to the 49,000 people who have contracts with the program.