



EDITORIAL: Putting people back to work has its challenges

Published: Thursday, February 10, 2011, 9:49 AM Updated: Thursday, February 10, 2011, 9:50 AM



By **Press-Register Editorial Board**

GOV. ROBERT Bentley is sticking to the central theme of his campaign — creating more jobs for Alabamians. He deserves credit for staying on task and for keeping his pledge to refuse a salary until the state's unemployment rate falls to 5.2 percent.

Job growth is a daunting goal in this era of tight budgets, with no money available for the big incentives packages that in years past lured industrial giant ThyssenKrupp AG and shipbuilder Austal USA to south Alabama.

Realistically, while remaining open to the possibility of landing the occasional “big fish,” the new governor's challenge will be encouraging and assisting the state's medium- and small-size businesses to expand their employment rolls.

Indeed, earlier this week, Gov. Bentley downplayed the need for big recruiting projects as he addressed the Economic Development Association of Alabama. He noted that while it's nice for the state to win the likes of Mercedes-Benz, Honda, Hyundai, Toyota and ThyssenKrupp, small business and existing industry account for much of the state's job growth.

He went on to say that the state can no longer offer rich incentives to recruit industry, because those funds just aren't there anymore. What the state can do instead, he said, is to make sure that workers are well-educated and well-trained.

He is right on both counts. First, the state's coffers are virtually bare. Second, highly trained workers are vital to economic development efforts. So is making sure that startup companies have support and access to mentors who can help them.

When it's feasible, a governor can play a unique role in building international relationships and laying the groundwork for future deals. These relationships can bear fruit, if not immediately then over the long run.

The most recent numbers from the Alabama Development Office show that 16,673 jobs were created by new and existing industry in 2009. New industry contributed 9,624 of the jobs, while expansions accounted for 7,049 jobs. In other words, both approaches are important.

Gov. Bentley has surrounded himself with some of Alabama's best thinkers on economic development. He's got Seth Hammett, former House speaker and a recruiting guru; and Bill Taylor, longtime head of Mercedes-Benz's Alabama operations and president of the state's largest private economic development group.

Gov. Bentley can take advantage of their wise counsel as he considers ideas for how to put more people back to work. Alabama's economic well-being — and his own salary — depend upon his success.

© 2011 al.com. All rights reserved.