

MS Special Session Friday For Auto Parts Maker

Emily Wagster Pettus, Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant is calling lawmakers back to the Capitol this Friday for what many hope will be a quick a special session to lure an auto parts maker to the state.

Bryant has released few details about the project, beyond saying it's for Mississippi's "automobile corridor."

Several lawmakers say an international company wants to build a tire manufacturing plant near West Point, in Clay County. They say it could create hundreds of jobs in a part of the state with chronically high unemployment.

Clay County had an 18.2 percent jobless rate in March. That's the highest rate among any of the state's 82 counties, according to the Mississippi Department of Employment Security.

Rep. Tyrone Ellis, D-Starkville, said Wednesday he's optimistic lawmakers will approve the incentives.

"Certainly, this community needs a shot in the arm," said Ellis, whose district includes Clay County.

The session begins at 10 a.m. Friday.

Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves and House Speaker Philip Gunn issued separate news releases supporting the special session agenda and saying job creation is a top priority.

Bryant and the Mississippi Development Authority are asking the House and Senate to pass an incentives package that includes state and local tax breaks, according to the proclamation the governor issued Wednesday to set the session.

"This is an exciting project and a great testament to the quality of our workforce," Bryant said in a news release.

Mississippi has two auto manufacturing plants — Nissan near Canton and Toyota near Blue Springs. West Point is about 65 miles southeast of Blue Springs and 125 miles northeast of Canton, with four-lane highways connecting West Point to the two other sites. It was not immediately clear whether Nissan or Canton would use tires produced at the proposed new plant.

Rep. Steve Holland, D-Plantersville, said Wednesday that he hopes a new tire manufacturer won't hurt Cooper Tire & Rubber Co., which has long had a manufacturing plant in Tupelo.

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"Cooper Tire has been a good employer here and a good corporate citizen," Holland said Wednesday.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Joey Fillingane, R-Sumrall, said he and other lawmakers are receiving private briefings this week about the project. In Mississippi, it's not unusual for a governor and MDA executives to keep details about job-creation projects confidential until lawmakers are calling into special session.

"They want to keep a lid on them until the very last minute," Fillingane said Tuesday. "It's not uncommon, in my experience, that we would have scant details about a project until legislation is drafted."

Bryant said Monday that the economic development special session would be separate from a special session he is expected to call later to keep Mississippi's Medicaid program in business. During the three-month regular session that ended April 4, lawmakers did not adopt a Medicaid budget and did not pass a bill that would keep the program in business once the state's new fiscal year begins July 1.

The Medicaid bills died amid a partisan dispute over whether to expand the program to people making up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level, which is allowed under the federal health care law that President Barack Obama signed in 2010. At 138 percent of the poverty level, a person would have an income of about \$15,000. The Medicaid income cutoff in Mississippi now is about \$5,500, and even under that limit, the state still does not cover many adults.

Bryant and other Republicans say Mississippi can't afford the expansion, even with the federal government paying most of the tab. Democrats say the state should extend Medicaid to help uninsured working people and to assure a flow of federal money to support medical providers.

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