

Study praises AL's Bentley for spending restraint, knocks him for narrow tax breaks

By Johnny Kampis

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CULLMAN, Ala. — Alabama's Gov. Robert Bentley was among the top-scoring state leaders in a national study on fiscal issues, but the Republican's policies could still use improvement in some areas, argue the authors.

Bentley got a B in the 12th annual "Fiscal Policy Report Card on America's Governors" by Nicole Kaeding and Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute, a free-market, limited-government oriented think tank.

That puts the Yellowhammer State governor fifth on the list. He got high marks for a only-slight rise in the general fund budget, from \$7.6 billion in 2012 to a proposed \$7.8 billion in 2015.

"Under Bentley, Alabama has made reforms to its pension systems, state workforce, and other parts of government to improve quality and reduce costs," Edwards and Kaeding wrote.

They noted state government employment is down about 3 percent since Bentley took office.

Bentley's tax policies, on the other hand, "are less inspiring," the authors wrote. Fans of board-based tax reform, Cato knocked Bentley for corporate welfare policies and other narrow tax breaks.

"He has opposed tax increases, but not pushed for major tax reforms. Recent tax changes have provided only narrow breaks, such as a tax credit for hiring veterans, a sales tax holiday, and incentives for particular companies that build plants in the state," Edwards and Kaeding wrote.

Bentley fared much better than the four Republican governors from bordering states. Mississippi's Phil Bryant and Georgia's Nathan Deal got C's, while Tennessee's Bill Haslam and Florida's Rick Scott got D's.

Four governors earned A's on the study, while eight flunked out.

Unsurprisingly, more small-government-minded Republican governors scored better overall than their Democratic counterparts.