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## Democrats to try again on bill to remove tax on groceries

*By Bob Johnson  
The Associated Press*

Democrats in the Alabama House plan to try today for the fourth time this session to remove the state's 4 percent sales tax on groceries, but even a change offered by its sponsor is unlikely to help the measure pass.

Republican leaders oppose the bill because it would raise income taxes on some wealthy taxpayers to replace the \$400 million in revenue that would be lost by removing the tax on groceries.

The measure's sponsor, Rep. John Knight, D-Montgomery, said he plans to offer a substitute bill today that would phase in removing the sales tax on groceries over a three-year period. In the first year, it also would only raise taxes for single taxpayers making more than \$400,000 a year and for married taxpayers making more than \$800,000.

If it passes the Legislature, the proposed constitutional amendment would have to be approved by voters in a statewide referendum.

Democrats were not able to get the three-fifths vote needed to bring the issue up for debate in the first three tries. The last vote fell two votes short, 55 for and 44 against, as the House's 43 Republicans stuck together in opposition.

House Minority Leader Rep. Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, said he doesn't expect any of those votes to change today, when the grocery tax measure is the first item on the House's work agenda.

"I don't see any different outcome. It's very clear this is all about redistribution of wealth. It's all about increasing taxes on the people who are creating jobs," Hubbard said.

The proposed amendment would replace the lost revenue by removing the income tax deduction for federal income taxes paid for the higher income taxpayers. Republicans claim this would increase taxes on some small business owners who file their taxes for their businesses through their personal tax returns.

Knight said he believes he has gone as far as he can go to reach a compromise and has removed the Republican argument that the proposal would raise taxes on working families.

"This is my compromise," he said of the substitute he planned to introduce today. "I don't know of any more I can give on it. This makes it a gradual reduction of the sales tax and only the people on the very high end of the scale will have to pay more."

Auburn Montgomery political scientist D'Linell Finley said Democratic leaders continue to try to pass the bill because they believe it's a popular cause with voters.

"You have to admit there's appeal to removing taxes from groceries. It's a noble idea," Finley said. "But as long as you can't come up with a strategy that avoids placing higher taxes on other people, you are not going to get Republicans to support it."

House Majority Leader Ken Guin, who is chairman of the agenda-setting Rules Committee, said he felt it was right to give Knight one more chance to pass the bill. Removing the sales tax from groceries was the number one priority for House Democrats going into the session.

"It's such an important issue to us, we just felt we had to try it one more time. It's something we know will make a difference in the lives of average Alabamians," Guin said.

The bill is supported by Alabama Arise, an advocacy group for low income residents. Its executive director, Kimble Forrister, said his organization has been calling Republican representatives, hoping to change a few votes.

"Most Republicans will do better under this plan," Forrister said.

Rep. Robert Bentley of Tuscaloosa is considered a moderate Republican who voted for the grocery tax last year, when it passed the House, but failed in the Senate.

Bentley has voted "no" each of the three times the bill has come up this session and said he does not plan to change that vote today.

"I'm going to stick with my vote because with the state of economy like it is right now, we don't need to be raising taxes on anybody. This would raise taxes on the people who pay the most taxes," Bentley said.