

Counties may control weeds, junk

By **KIM CHANDLER**
News staff writer

MONTGOMERY — For decades, Alabamians usually got the same response when they went to their county commissioners to complain about rural junkyards or overgrown lots.

There's nothing we can do. But that might change soon. Gov. Bob Riley has signed into law a bill that would give counties — provided rural voters agree — limited home rule powers to pass ordinances regulat-

ing nuisances such as overgrown weeds, junkyards and noise. The law does not give counties taxing or zoning powers.

"I don't know that people are going to wake up tomorrow and say, 'My heavens, this is different.' But I think in 10 years people will see a real difference," said Sonny Brasfield, assistant executive director of the Association of County Commissioners of Alabama.

Brasfield said Shelby and Jefferson counties largely already have those powers. But the law represents a major

change for most of Alabama. Previously, county commissioners had to come running to the Alabama Legislature for permission to address weeds or noisy racetracks, he said.

Brasfield said he expects several counties to rush to get the idea on the ballot during the June 2006 primaries.

For a county to have the new powers, a majority of rural voters in that county

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Association of County
Commissions

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would have to agree to it in a referendum. Either the county commission can call for a referendum or voters can call for it through a petition process. Brasfield said that was a key fix-ture to get the bill approved.

Only people living in the unincorporated areas would get to vote. That was done to ensure that city dwellers couldn't force the changes onto rural-area folk.

Brasfield said he expects counties to move quickly on getting the new powers.

The Bibb County Commission sometimes gets complaints about weeds or junkyards, particularly in the fast-growing northern section of the county.

That's where people have built \$200,000 and \$300,000

houses and aren't necessarily pleased about fields of junk cars and weed-covered lots on their way to and from work, said County Administrator Mark Tyner.

"A lot of these people expect city services," Tyner said.

Tyner said the new law could address those complaints, but he doesn't know if it's something the commission or residents would want.

Walker County Commission Chairman Bruce Hamrick said he doesn't know if commissioners will try to enact the powers.

"We need to discuss it. It's very weak," Hamrick said.

Brasfield said the association had been trying to get the bill approved for more than a decade.

Lawmakers gave their final blessings to the bill only after repeated assurances that it did not give counties zoning authority or the ability to levy exorbitant fees for nuisance abatement.

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