

Lobby for the poor won't make any politician richer

Alabamians are being inundated, and almost certainly disgusted, by the tawdry details of a federal trial involving big money that lobbyists for gambling interests allegedly paid lawmakers for votes to legalize casino-style electronic bingo.

Meanwhile, a far humbler lobbying effort of a very different kind quietly continues in Alabama, with hardly a ripple in the pond of public or media attention. But it's an effort that, if it should ever be successful, will be making a difference in the lives of Alabamians long after the names of sleazy casino bag men and money-grubbing lawmakers have been mercifully forgotten.

The decidedly unglamorous offices of a nonprofit called Alabama Arise sit near the bottom of the hill crowned by the Alabama Capitol, the seat of state power, money and influence. Alabama Arise is in effect a poor people's lobby, an organization established to represent the interests of the state's long underrepresented (politically, if not demographically) working poor. And among its many legislative efforts is the campaign to "untax" groceries.

Alabama is one of only two states (Mississippi, surely to nobody's surprise, is the other) that still fully tax food. Rep. John Knight, D-Montgomery, a Vietnam vet awarded the Silver Star for battlefield valor, has exemplified a different kind of courage in his legislative career -- a tireless campaign to chip away at Alabama's unconscionable tax system. House Bill 242 was his latest effort to remove the state's 4 percent sales tax on groceries; it failed for the fourth consecutive year, earning Knight the un-coveted Shroud Award for the deadest bill of the session. It didn't even make it to the floor for debate.

So much for a change Alabama Arise says would free up \$325 million for local economies and save every Alabama household the equivalent of two weeks' groceries a year.

Given Alabama's legislative record, nobody should be surprised. The state's tax structure is notoriously bottom-loaded: It shifts the heaviest tax burden down the economic ladder to those least able to pay, to the advantage of the politically connected and their legislative lapdogs.

Double-digit sales taxes are just one of the ways working families who can ill afford it get the Alabama tax shaft. The Washington-based nonprofit Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy calculated that Alabama's state income tax is the nation's third lowest for the top 1 percent of earners, and third highest for the bottom one-fifth.

Throw in the innate regressiveness of sales tax, made infinitely more so in Alabama by the myriad exemptions that special interests enjoy, and those numbers become even more grotesque and morally reprehensible.

Poor people don't make for a promising source of lobbyist largess. Sooner or later, Alabama is going to figure out that they also don't make for much of a tax base.