

Governor Wants To Work with Legislators To Set 2002 Budget

A strong, stable budget is a must for the State of Mississippi. States across the nation are experiencing a slowdown in the economy. We are not in normal times, and we cannot keep doing things the way we have. Our administration has focused on finding new, innovative ways to face the challenges before us and find solutions that work for our people. Before we can talk about the budget for Fiscal Year 2002, we have to get a handle on the budget for Fiscal Year 2001.

We have studied the Joint Legislative Budget Committee's (JLBC) budget proposal, and we agree in some areas. We also differ in some areas. Our budget is reflective of our people's priorities. It is the people of Mississippi's budget, and we want to work in coordination with the JLBC to prioritize the people's needs. By working together in this process, we are sharing ideas, priorities and solutions. Those priorities are education, economic development, healthcare and public safety.

The JLBC proposed budget makes it extremely difficult for our agencies to meet the needs of our people. We propose using funds from the AMS settlement, which is a very good option that we have available to us. AMS settlement funds total \$120 million, which would be paid to the state in the form of \$10 million per year, for 12 years. We propose foregoing the annual payments for a one-time lump-sum payment of approximately \$93 million. This \$93 million, used to pay one-time expenses, will help us reach a stable and strong budget today and for the future. We need the use of this money now, to invest in our economy. We cannot afford to lose services for our people.

Education is a perfect example of where we have a difference of philosophy with the Budget Committee. The Committee said they would fund the teacher pay raise, but they took the money to do so from education general support. We cannot give our teachers raises and then not support their teaching budgets. A strong education is vital to all future successes for the people of the State. It is the cornerstone from which we build success in the economic development, healthcare and other areas that have a direct impact on the quality of life of our people.

We have shown that we are committed to economic development in the State. The Advantage Mississippi Initiative is proof of that commitment, and we cannot lose that momentum. The Committee budgeted only \$24 million for economic development in Mississippi; our budget proposes \$34 million. Our people deserve the opportunity for new, good high-paying jobs, and we must do all we are able to provide those opportunities for Mississippians.

Our budget reflects our firm commitment to promoting public safety. Our communities, our streets and our homes must be safe. The fight is for our children. The

fight is for our neighborhoods. The fight is for our future, and a good quality of life for our people. We are proposing the funds needed to make public safety a priority.

Funding healthcare is another priority. We are committed to doing what can be done to make sure that our state and public school employees have access to affordable, quality health insurance. The Budget Committee has budgeted \$7.6 million. We have budgeted \$10 million, and we are fully funding the Division of Medicaid. We must ensure that our people have access to health care options they need for themselves and their families.

We have given the Committee a plan of action to implement this budget. As we work together, past political boundaries and self-imposed borders, we can make Mississippi's future a bright one. Fiscal conservatism hand in hand with innovation will help us reach unprecedented goals and make unparalleled progress for our people.