

Governor's column – 9/23/01

Now more than ever, we must work together

Since Tuesday, September 11, we have united in shock, grief, mourning, anger, frustration, and prayer. The terrorist attacks on our country have reminded us all of the things we have so often taken for granted – our families, our freedoms, our basic way of life.

As we rally around the flag and stand in support of President Bush's call for the world to take on those who rain terror on the innocent, we are also dealing with the growing knowledge that our economy will suffer from the attacks of September 11 as well. We are already seeing the effects on the airline industry, as travel schedules lighten and employees face furloughs and lay-offs. We have been feeling the effects of a sluggish national economy here in Mississippi for the past year, and we are only seeing the beginning of what will be a long journey to economic recovery.

If we are going to deal with the economic issues that confronted us prior to the attacks and those issues that will come up in the weeks and months to come, we must do it together. We cannot allow the politics of personality to drive our work; rather, we must build on the unity now driving our nation to do the work we have been elected to do.

On the morning of the attacks, I was scheduled to speak to the Joint Legislative Select Study Committee on the proposal to improve health care in Mississippi that I unveiled at the Neshoba County Fair in July. After meeting with legislators, we agreed to postpone the meeting. This coming Tuesday, we will convene again to discuss our ideas about how to best address the health care needs of the people of Mississippi.

To begin with, there are several areas where Mississippi leads the nation – and shouldn't. These are the areas we refer to as our "worst firsts." For example, we have the highest prevalence of diabetes. We have the highest death rate from heart disease. We have the greatest number of people underserved by primary care physicians. We have the highest

adjusted death rate. The power to change these statistics lies, simply, within our desire to see them changed.

Secondly, there are many Mississippians who cannot afford health insurance or do not have access to quality health care. Approximately 75 percent of our state employees do not have their dependents covered by the state insurance plan. Many cannot afford it, and the premium increases proposed last month will only add to that number. We have an opportunity to help these people and make a difference in their lives.

The basic premise of my proposal is to take a portion of the future annual tobacco payments coming in to the state, thanks to the good work of Attorney General Mike Moore, and use that money to draw down matching federal dollars. In accordance with the law, the money would only be used for health care. And, once again, it is important to emphasize the fact that this proposal does not touch the principal of the tobacco trust fund. That principal would never decrease, and would reach \$1 billion by 2008.

The easiest way to explain it is to say, give us a quarter and we can turn it into a dollar.

That dollar can be used to help put more school nurses in place to ensure the health of our children, to help expand breast and cervical cancer screenings and treatment, and to help fight diabetes and heart disease in our population.

The questions we have to ask ourselves are, do we screen someone for diabetes today, or face the costs of an amputation from complications tomorrow? Do we test for heart disease today, or help pay for a transplant tomorrow?

This issue is complicated, and that's why I brought it to the table five months before the legislative session. And now, in light of the tragic events of September 11 and the gathering of our nation, I hope we can gather here for the good of the people of Mississippi and share in an honest discussion of what we can do together.

