

*Remarks for the
Budget Presentation
November 14, 2002*

Good afternoon. For nearly two years now, our nation has been faced with a national recession. This recession has affected the budgets of every state, not to mention every household.

Here in Mississippi, we have weathered this recession better than many of our neighbors. We have kept critical state services operating for our people, in spite of the fact that our budget – and the budgeting process – are far from perfect.

I want to commend our state agencies, their directors and the state employees who have worked so hard to save money while continuing to provide desperately needed services during these difficult times.

We have remained disciplined. We have remained focused. However, we have a lot of work still to do.

This past Sunday, the Clarion-Ledger reported that a record number of states are facing serious budget issues. There are glimmers of hope for a recovery in the national economy, but that recovery will take time – and it will take even longer to reach the states. This is not a Republican or Democrat issue – it is a national issue.

With that in mind, we must continue to make the difficult decisions and set priorities. Today, those decisions and priorities have taken shape in my budget recommendations for the 2004 fiscal year.

I have always had one main priority for the state of Mississippi, a priority that is the foundation for everything we do in economic development, health care, public safety. You know that priority is education, and my budget recommendation backs it up.

We started this budget process focusing on education – and we ended the process with a budget that puts “Schools First”, with 62 percent of the budget going towards education.

We have made great progress in education, and now is not the time to stop. The evidence is clear. We have passed a historic teacher pay package that will lift the average teacher salary from 49th to 19th in the nation.

By the end of this year, every public school classroom in the state will have an Internet-accessible computer in place and being used by students. Mississippi will be the first state in the nation to do this – a fact verified by the National Governors Association.

Test scores are up. The Princeton Review ranked Mississippi’s testing system as the sixth best in the nation. More than 1,000 teachers in the state are nationally-board certified, the sixth highest number in the nation. 62 percent of high school graduates, according to the Southern Regional Education Board, are going on to college – the tenth highest number in the nation.

We were the first state in the nation to host a Leadership Summit on Higher Education, a meeting that presented six major priorities for the future of education in Mississippi, from sending kids to school ready to learn to research and development at our universities and colleges.

We are also one of six states in the nation to participate in a pilot program for implementing the mandates of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation recently passed by Congress. In choosing Mississippi, it was said we had “an infectious enthusiasm and commitment to students.”

We have made great progress in education. It’s time to step up our commitment and continue to make a difference for the future of this state, and for the future of our children.

My budget recommendation fully funds the teacher pay raise, it restores the Mississippi Adequate Education Program to the 2004 fiscal year funding level, and replaces one time money put into adequate education.

It works toward fewer children in each classroom so teachers can focus on student needs, and for more counselors to help students with the decisions they face as they work toward graduation.

It works toward getting rid of portable classrooms, those “temporary buildings” that have become permanent in too many schools, and give our teachers and children safe buildings. It’s time for them to be able to focus on learning, and not on the roof leaking above their head.

And it works for our universities and junior colleges, to end the exodus of the talented professors and teachers who are leaving Mississippi to teach in other states. My budget calls for \$200 million – \$20 million over 10 years, funded through the issuance of general obligation bonds – to recruit and retain the best minds for Mississippi.

We’ve invested hundreds of millions of dollars in buildings. It’s time to invest in our people.

I have set priorities for this budget – and education is priority number one.

The work cannot and does not stop there, however.

Our state and our nation are living under a different mindset now, since the terrorist attacks of September 11. New threats demand new measures to ensure the safety and security of the public.

We have worked hard to do just that. I want to build on that work by proposing \$20 million for the enforcement of homeland security measures. These funds would be used to support the work of the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Public Safety, the Mississippi National Guard, the Department of Health, and other agencies charged with the protection of our people.

And then there is the work of growing Mississippi. In the face of the difficult economic times, this work has continued unabated, and the numbers tell the story.

Since January 2000, we have seen the growth of more than 1,700 new and expanded facilities; over 47,000 new jobs; and \$12.9 billion invested in the state. More than 21,000 of the new jobs have come through the expansion of existing business.

The headlines focus on the big projects, like Nissan and the 5,300 jobs and \$1.5 billion investment. That's a great story about what we're doing; but the fact that we've been named as one of the top ten states in the nation for small business survival is equally important.

This work, like our progress in education, must continue. To support it, I am calling for an increase in funding for our work in economic development – including \$20 million to be used for infrastructure. Our people and our industries demand and deserve safe roads and safe bridges. We need to make it happen.

My budget recommendation makes the hard decisions, and it sets priorities for Mississippi during tough economic times. Every family in Mississippi has been forced to make some sacrifices; it's time for government to make some sacrifices, too.

That's why I am proposing a 12.9 percent decrease for administrative functions in state government. The most important task we have is to provide the necessary services for the people of this state – services like education, homeland security and economic development.

There are challenges ahead of us in the coming year, but that's nothing new. What is new is the manner in which I am proposing to take on those challenges and turn them into opportunities for our people.

The people of Columbus, Mississippi, needed bold and decisive action after Sunday night's devastating storms. The people of Mississippi want bold and decisive action. This plan fits the bill.