

*Remarks to the  
Ripley Rotary Club  
Tuesday, August 21, 2001*

Thank you, and what a great day to be in Ripley. On November 28, 1821, the legislature designated Jackson as the permanent site of the state capital.

One hundred seventy-nine years later, we've moved it to Ripley, Mississippi – on a temporary basis.

Today is the very first “Capital for a Day” in Mississippi.

What I wanted to do was take state government out of Jackson, out of the offices and buildings where the work is done.

I wanted to make sure that a reminder was sent to the people who are up here today – a reminder that says we work for you.

Everything we do in state government is done to serve you and make the most of the incredible potential of this state and her people.

And so, today we have twelve state departments who have set up shop in Ripley. We've set up phone lines, we've got computers ready to go. We've got people who have been here since seven o'clock this morning, and we'll all be here until seven o'clock tonight.

I want to take a moment to thank Mayor Mike Harrison and all those here who have helped make this day happen. Your work has been invaluable, and it is greatly appreciated.

I'm proud that we are in Ripley. There have been calls for us to do this in Tupelo, in Hattiesburg, in Meridian – but I am in those towns on a fairly regular basis.

I wanted this program to go directly to the people of Mississippi, and what better place to start than Ripley.

U. S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once remarked that “the most important political office is that of the private citizen.” He was right – those of us who serve in government do so at the will and pleasure of the private citizen. Because of this, we are bound to hear your opinions and respond to your needs.

I appreciate the opportunity to be with you today, because I want to talk with you about a proposal I have made that I believe responds to your needs.

At the Neshoba County Fair a few weeks ago, I laid an idea on the table – an idea to take a portion of the millions of dollars we are receiving each year from the tobacco companies, and put them to work for you.

You're all aware of the major tobacco settlement reached about four years ago, in a battle led by Attorney General Mike Moore. Mike worked hard to get this money in, and I want to give him credit for his tremendous efforts.

The Legislature set up a trust fund for that money we would get from the tobacco companies. By law, we cannot touch the money in that trust fund, and the earnings can only be spent on health-related concerns.

Today, that trust fund has about \$650 million in it. This year, it will earn about \$19 million in interest.

That trust fund will continue to grow, and grow, and grow. Contrary to what many people believe, there is no time limit on when payments to the fund will end. The only thing that will stop the payments is for the tobacco companies to go out of business.

So, let me pose a few questions to you.

First, how much is enough in the trust fund?

We will be over the \$1 billion mark within the next few years. That's a staggering amount of money.

Second, how much of a difference can we make in health care with earnings of \$19 million this year? We are all too aware of the sluggish condition of the national economy and what the effect has been on interest rates.

What I have proposed is an idea to take a portion of the annual tobacco payments – this year’s payment will be \$210 million – and use it to capture federal matching funds for health-related concerns.

Let me make something very clear here – I am not, in any way, proposing that we raid the principal of the trust fund. That is not a part of this proposal.

In fact, under my proposal, the trust fund will continue to grow, it will continue to earn interest, and it will reach the \$1 billion mark by the year 2008. That doesn't sound like raiding the principal to me.

What I am asking for is an examination of the possibilities of what we could do. There are federal funds out there that other states have been bringing in for years, and we haven't made the first move toward getting our share.

If we work hard, if we develop creative ideas, we can get our share – and what a difference that could make.

We could improve our rural health care services. We could make sure every Mississippian has access to necessary health care. We could build up emergency response services, such as ambulances, in areas that today don't have them.

We could ensure that the people of Mississippi have access to screenings that could detect potentially fatal diseases such as cancer and diabetes.

If the money is there for services such as these, shouldn't we be going after it?

As an example, if we took \$100 million of the \$210 million payment coming in this year, we could match it with federal dollars in Medicaid – and turn \$100 million into \$500 million.

That's \$500 million for health care for the people of Mississippi. Compare that to the \$19 million in earnings this year on the trust fund – which is the better deal?

I have been meeting with the legislative leadership – Speaker Ford and Lieutenant Governor Tuck – as well as the Attorney General on this issue, and they are open to discussion.

I put this idea on the table five months before the legislative session, so the members of the House and Senate would have time to discuss it.

I have been having the members of the Legislature to lunch at the Governor's Mansion to talk about this with them, and the meetings have been very positive.

I look forward to working with Representative Greg Ward from here in Ripley to work toward an answer. I want to hear from Senator Nicky Browning, to hear his thoughts and ideas.

Again, keep in mind that we're not talking about touching the principal of the trust fund. Mississippi is one of the only states in the nation that hasn't touched its tobacco trust fund or used its earnings for something besides health care.

Tennessee, our good neighbor, has raided its entire fund of tobacco money to make up for budget shortfalls. That's not what we're doing.

We have the chance here to do something truly great for the people of Mississippi. What a tragedy it would be if we had the chance to make a real difference, and we lost it.

I don't want that to happen.

It's a great day to be in Ripley, and I thank you for being the first "Capital for a Day."