

Governor's column for 7/29/01

Plan of Action for Mississippi Addresses Issues

It's been a busy few days.

On Monday, July 23, Mississippi made history as the members of the Mississippi Legislature voted to remove the five percent provision on teacher pay and make the commitment to our teachers and education. I am proud of the work they did, and I appreciate their dedication to this issue.

On the same day, we lost a literary legend and daughter of Mississippi. Eudora Welty's passing has left a void in the collective life of our state. Her writings shared with the world the people, the places and the experiences that are unique to Mississippi. She provided us with a sense of place, and I believe there will never be another writer who will equal her impact on us all.

This past week we shared in the joy of the teacher pay raise and the sorrow of Ms. Welty's death. Now, we have to look forward and build on the foundations they have made for Mississippi.

In Monday's special session, part of the debate centered on addressing issues beyond the teacher pay raise issue, such as a pay raise for state employees and faculty at our universities, community and junior colleges. I have a plan to address those issues, and it is Mississippi's plan of action.

This plan of action is what is needed next in Mississippi. We did good work this past week, but we can't sit back now and rest. We have to keep going.

I know, and you know, that the future of our state is limited only by our imaginations. There are obstacles to be overcome, to be sure, and I won't build our future by giving you

false information and false hope. We have to look at the situation around us, set priorities, and get about the business of creating our own opportunities.

We are all aware of the tobacco lawsuit and trust fund established as part of the settlement. Each year, the State of Mississippi receives payments from the tobacco industry, which are placed into a Health Care Trust Fund and invested by an appointed board. By the terms of the settlement, the money in the fund cannot be touched. The balance in that fund right now stands at \$649 million, and the annual payments won't end as long as the tobacco companies are in business.

I want to use those annual payments for health care, as required by law, but I want that money to go much farther – and here's how we do it. For every dollar the state puts into Medicaid, we receive 76 cents back from the federal government. If we were to take just a portion of the annual tobacco payment, say \$150 million, and put it into Medicaid, we would receive nearly \$450 million from the federal government.

With one bold move, our total investment in health care is nearly as much as the balance currently sitting in the Health Care Trust Fund.

With the general funds freed up by diverting part of the tobacco settlement payment, we can address the other major issues in Mississippi – pay raises and enhanced health insurance for state employees, plus ensuring a raise for the faculty at our universities and colleges.

We cannot and should not limit the promise and potential of our state. We have to take bold and creative steps to make a difference. By making the most of the resources already in place, we can do what needs to be done, and do it now.