

State of the State Address
Governor Ronnie Musgrove
January 5, 2001

Governor Tuck. Mr. Speaker. Members of the Mississippi Legislature. Chief Justice Pittman and Justices of the Supreme Court. Elected Officials. Agency Directors. Distinguished Guests. My fellow Mississippians.

On January 4th, 2000, the members of the Mississippi House of Representatives made history. The members of this House heard the voices of Mississippi's people and ratified their vote. One year later, we gather again to make history. One year later, we have yet another opportunity to listen to the voices of our people.

Members of the Mississippi House of Representatives and the State Senate, I implore you to hear our people again. Listen to them. Give them an opportunity to determine the destiny of Mississippi's state flag. The people of Mississippi are waiting. The world is watching. I urge you to put this issue on the ballot and let us move forward. We must not be distracted by the rhetoric on either side of this emotion-laden issue.

Let our people decide, and let our attention return swiftly to those matters of our common interest, of our common concern, and of our common destiny.

If we are true to our agenda for opportunity, if we are truly committed to progress, then we must lay aside our differences on this matter and move together, in one accord, toward a future endowed with success and security for every community, for every Mississippian.

And so we meet this morning to inventory our common victories and identify our common challenges.

Over the past year, we have discovered a new state of mind. We have renewed a spirit of hope. We have found the determination to succeed. Together we have told the nation and the world we will not settle for second best. We will not be labeled or told we can not, just because we are Mississippi. That confidence is contagious. I believe it breeds success.

You have shared our enthusiasm for public education, and we have written a new plan for economic expansion. You were there to work with us. Think again of the excitement in the air when Nissan selected Mississippi for their new site. Last year, we competed against our sister states and landed an economic project in the top 1% of all projects in the United States. Today we stand in the spotlight of the nation and the world. In the summer of 2003, Nissan trucks and SUVs will roll off the line because 4,000 Mississippians built them. Why? Because we dared to imagine it. We dared to believe in this state and in ourselves. We would not give in and we did not give up.

*Recognize Melanie (birthday), Jordan and Carmen Rae
Carmen Rae batting in Iowa on the Field of Dreams...*

A great line from that movie says, 'build it and they will come.' I say: invest in them and they will stay. That is the heart and soul of our agenda for opportunity.

Invest in education.
Invest in new industries and homegrown businesses.
Invest in housing and health.
Invest to make a difference.

During this critical legislative session, we can't waste our time whining about why not. We need to stay focused on how we will. About half of the states are grappling with slowing growth just like we are. We continue to enjoy a higher level of prosperity than most of us can remember.

We have the resources and we have the responsibility to do what we need to do. We will simply have to do things differently. How we've always done it isn't going to get it. Diligence, determination and discipline must be the hallmarks of the 2001 Legislative Session.

At the end of the day, our people expect us to invest their dollars wisely and meet their needs responsibly without exceptions and without excuses. We must remedy careless expenditures of one-time funding for on-going expenses and carefully craft a budget to meet our people's needs without exception. We can eliminate the excuses of agency directors and give them the flexibility to match dollars with needs.

These agency directors are the face of this administration, and I am going to ask them to stand and be recognized. They are the face of Mississippi. They are here to serve our people.

John Allison, Executive Director of the Department of Banking and Consumer Finance
Gary Anderson, Executive Director of the Department of Finance and Administration
Janice Broome-Brooks, Executive Director of the Department of Human Services
J.C. Burns, Executive Director of the Mississippi Development Authority
Dr. Glen Carpenter, Executive Director of the Department of Marine Resources
Charles Chisholm, Executive Director of the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality
Dr. Angie Dvorak, President and CEO of Mississippi Technology, Inc.
David Huggins, Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Public Safety
Robert Johnson, Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections
Robert Latham, Executive Director of the Mississippi Emergency Management Authority
Rica Lewis-Payton, Director of the Division of Medicaid
James Lipscomb, Adjutant General of the Mississippi Military Department
Dr. Mable Murphree, Executive Director, Appalachian Regional Commission, AND
Don Strange, Executive Director of the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics.

Give them the authority to allocate resources and hold them accountable. I certainly will. The people of this state will.

496,588 children attend public schools in Mississippi right now. 496,588 school children are pinning tomorrow's economic success on today's educational opportunities in Mississippi's public schools. Educating our children must be our first priority.

With the 2000 education accountability bill and Dr. Richard Thompson's leadership, our schools--their administrators, faculty and students—are measuring real progress, recognizing deficiencies and rewarding excellence. Encouraging progress from the classroom, we can expect great things for our schools and more importantly for our students.

The computer technology task force's diligence and determination matched with state and private dollars will make Mississippi one of the first states in the nation to bring the Internet to every classroom. Our children can be masters over technology, using it to learn and to explore our world, while many of us with slightly grayer hair still struggle with the VCR.

Mississippi's adequate education program ensures schools can open and operate in quality facilities with quality resources for learning. Don't gut these programs and leave the counties holding the bag.

Technology and textbooks aside, our children won't learn without qualified, inspired teachers in the classroom. Mississippi's teachers continue to outshine teachers in other states. Our national board certification numbers are a resounding testament to their commitment to teaching. Removing the five percent revenue growth condition on pay increases would be a strong testament to our commitment to Mississippi's teachers.

The five percent condition on pay raises for teachers isn't a commitment; it's an excuse. Remove the five percent condition.

Mississippi's educational outlook grows brighter. Nothing less than a continued commitment to excellence will do. Nothing less than fully funding adequate education, the critical teacher shortage act, and our teacher pay plan will do. Nothing less.

Our resolve to educate Mississippians must translate into sound support of our community colleges and universities.

We are asking them to take a greater role in economic development from recruiting industries, to research and development.

If we are going to utilize our Universities to the fullest, then the Ayers Case must be settled. Twenty-five years is long enough. It is time to move on.

Educating our children must be our first priority. You have my word that I will remind you of this again and again over the next 90 days.

We have a bold, new plan for economic growth in all 82 counties: rural and urban, agricultural and industrial. The impact of the Advantage Mississippi Initiative has already been measured by the success of attracting Nissan, but there is more.

The Advantage Mississippi Initiative established a rural development office responsible for targeting smaller communities and manufacturers. The Mississippi Development Authority is organizing that division now.

Within the week I will announce my appointments to the Mississippi Land, Water and Timber Resources Board so they can get to work on planning and implementing a strategy for this important sector of our economy.

With the new Capital Access Program, more Mississippi entrepreneurs than ever will have access to the resources they need to start small businesses across our state. In short order, a new director and a new direction are to be announced for the Minority Business Division of the Mississippi Development Authority.

By maximizing specific capabilities and assets, the On-TARGET Community Certification Program can assist local communities recruit, retain and grow businesses tailored to their communities. We expect to see this program reaching out to communities as early as April 1st.

Look at the difference innovative, creative leadership can make working together. Think about the contributions of Dwight Evans and the Public-Private Partnership for Economic Development. Think about the leadership of Blake Wilson and the Mississippi Economic Council. Both business organizations have stepped up as community leaders and partners in public service.

This March, the Governor's Office, MDA and MEC will come together to hold the Governor's Conference on International Trade on the heels of bringing world trade center status to Mississippi and in the wake of a visit by King Don Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain. We are opening our doors to international opportunities.

But don't forget, we have a commitment to businesses that are already here in Mississippi, and we are just as committed to helping them thrive and prosper.

Ask the Mississippi Development Authority to do more with less? Sure. But cutting one-third of the MDA budget as recommended by the Joint Legislative Budget Committee will cripple our ability to expand economic opportunities, to work with local communities building infrastructure, and to assist new and existing businesses alike. Such a drastic cut puts our economic potential in a stranglehold.

Quality schools. Quality jobs. Quality communities. We can build Mississippi one school at a time, one business at a time, and one community at a time. You and I know the state can't do everything. Building strong communities must be rooted in the communities. There is something to be said for owning your own home, having a greater stake in the community. From the state level, Mississippi's efforts to encourage homeownership have waned over time, but we are redoubling our efforts to work with communities, developers and potential homeowners to refocus our resources.

We have discretion in how certain federal dollars available through the HOME program are targeted. With the work of the Community Services division of the Mississippi Development Authority and community organizations, we are putting the emphasis on home ownership. The Single Family Residential Housing Construction Fund, a cooperative effort between MDA, Fannie Mae and the Mississippi Home Corporation looks to be back on track and should be operational early this year. Mississippi Home Corporation has reorganized and is revisiting how they do business so that more Mississippi families can find affordable housing across the state.

Even still, too many older Mississippians are struggling to maintain their independence or find affordable places to live. The statistics nationally are staggering. In Mississippi, our senior population is expected to increase by 84% over the next twenty-five years.

Mississippi's prison population is growing rapidly. Building our way out of this crisis is not an option even in the most prosperous times. We can't just change prisons; we have to change lives.

Working with Commissioner Robert Johnson and the Mississippi Prison Industries Corporation, we have a unique opportunity to address two seemingly unrelated needs. We believe we have found a way to offer older Mississippians smaller, affordable homes of their own while driving down the number of offenders returning to our Department of Corrections by helping them change careers.

I have met with representatives of the Prison Industries Board to ask them to conduct a feasibility study for the Governor's Homes for Seniors Project. Inmates can learn advanced carpentry, wiring, and roofing skills inside the penitentiary fences by building low-cost, energy-efficient, quality homes designed with elderly Mississippians in mind for purchase and placement on their property anywhere in Mississippi. Building homes for our parents and grandparents builds real opportunity for offenders and expands the pool of skilled workers for the future.

Having a safe place to live seems basic. Access to health care also seems basic. But as many older Mississippians struggle with where to live, too many Mississippians of all ages and walks of life struggle with rising costs for health care.

The creation last year of Medical Education Scholarship Programs provides full scholarships for up to twenty new recipients each year provided they agree to serve ten years in family medicine in a critical needs area of our state. In tandem with licensing physicians' assistants we will begin to see the expansion of access to health care particularly in rural areas. Continuing the effort to recruit doctors and other health care providers to rural Mississippi remains a top priority particularly in light of continuing federal disinterest in medical care for rural Americans.

Mississippi's First Lady, Melanie Musgrove, has begun her work promoting Breast Cancer Awareness across our state. Let me take just a moment to thank her for her work with the American Cancer Society. Research and awareness are essential if we are to stop this killer. The Governor's budget supports this effort, and I encourage your support as well.

The Mississippi Children's Health Insurance Program now has more than 18,000 children covered, up from a meager 500 when I took office. Can you imagine the difference health insurance is making for these working families? Thousands of children are not yet enrolled, but our efforts to reach working parents will not cease. Through the cooperative work of the Department of Human Services, the Division of Medicaid, and the Department of Finance and Administration, we continue to talk with working middle-class families who are eligible for CHIP. Now it's your turn again. Mississippi's CHIP must be reauthorized this year. This health insurance program is working for working families. Please help us continue to cover Mississippi's children.

I listened to a man in Tupelo, during our One-On-One session, talk of his inability to offer health insurance to his employees anymore. For decades this small businessman had prided himself on providing this benefit to his employees, but the cost and participation rates required by his insurance company were forcing him to face his employees with the bad news.

The cost of prescription medication continues to spiral, taxing all of us, especially those caught in the squeeze of the middle class. While pharmaceutical advertising budgets grow, our ability to afford the high-cost of medicine slips away.

Mississippi's package of health benefits for state employees may be better than some states across our nation, but it's not good enough. Both the Governor's budget and the Legislature's budget place a high priority on the state employees health insurance plan. As with private plans, deductibles continue to increase while coverage seems to shrink every year. Premiums rise and confidence falls.

We must not use the budget as an excuse to avoid tackling the difficult issues in health care. We may not solve all the problems with health insurance and prescription drug costs quickly, but we can begin with a sound investment in the health insurance we offer our state employees.

These are our priorities, the people's priorities:
Educating our children in strong public schools,
Targeting new and better jobs for our working men and women,
Building communities by enhancing our quality of life.

We have an agenda for opportunity. We have the opportunity to succeed. Opportunity is the state of the state in Mississippi, America's State of Promise.

Thank you and God bless the Great State of Mississippi.