

Each new year brings a new set of obstacles and challenges to our state. The best way for us to respond to them is through a strong partnership, one focused on turning those obstacles into opportunities and the challenges into chances for a better future.

We've made a great deal of progress. Municipal, county and state government have worked together to improve our infrastructure and create jobs. These alliances have led to the awarding of Community Development Block Grants for cities and towns around the state, and have served as a foundation for future partnerships to build Mississippi.

The safety of our people is a priority for my administration. The tragic bridge collapse this past November in Wayne County re-emphasized the importance of your work to ensure the safety and stability of our bridges, as well as your cooperation with the Office of State Aid.

Last summer, we recognized the importance of this issue and began working with the Office of State Aid Road Construction to address the construction of approximately 3,500 needed bridge projects, including 1,900 local system bridges. By combining funds borrowed from the Mississippi Development Bank with federal funds, approximately \$40 million in federal bridge replacement projects will be available this fiscal year. This will accelerate the construction of needed projects, enhancing the safety of our roads, bridges, and people.

My executive budget recommendation also calls for \$20 million in bonding to be used toward addressing the issue of Mississippi's roads and bridges. The time to act on this is now. We can't risk another life by wasting time debating.

The national economy continues to move slowly, and we must plan carefully. I have presented an executive budget recommendation that focuses on education, with 62 percent of the funds going to our schools. We must continue the good work we've already done for our schools, our teachers and our children. In the end, it's very simple – if we shortchange our investment in education, we shortchange our future.

We've been doing great things in Mississippi. The rest of the country is watching what is happening in education, in economic development, in health care and in public safety. The rest of the country knows we are setting the standard. Let's work together in the coming year to reinforce that message.