

*Remarks for the  
Delta Regional Authority  
June 27, 2002*

Thank you, Pete. Governor Huckabee, it is always a pleasure to be here in Arkansas, and I appreciate the work you have done to help build the Delta region.

The Delta Regional Authority is relatively new, but the issues before it are as deeply rooted as the history and the culture of this area. For generations, this region – spread across eight states and 240 counties – has lagged behind the rest of the nation in terms of education, employment and infrastructure.

Our challenge is to reverse the trends of the past generations – and set new standards for a new century.

How do we go about taking on that challenge?

The charge from Congress is, in short, to produce a development plan, assess needs and assets of the region, and encourage public and private participation in economic development projects.

Through the Advantage Mississippi Initiative, we are already working to meet that charge from the state level. This aggressive economic development initiative offers programs to meet the particular needs of businesses and bring them to rural areas.

For example, the Growth and Prosperity – or GAP – program offers incentives to companies to expand or locate in economically challenged areas. The Advantage Jobs program provides incentives for businesses that bring jobs paying at least 125 percent of the average wage for the state or county.

The Advantage Mississippi Initiative is already proving itself, but to build this Delta region we must look beyond the original charge from Washington.

I believe the underlying mission for our work goes far deeper than that. The challenge before us requires it to.

We have to look at issues such as education, health care, technology and, of course, the focus of this summit – transportation.

Priorities must be set and adhered to. We must decide what's important for this area, what's good for the people living here, what's the greatest need, what's the best thing we can do to reverse a trend.

I have staked a claim in education; I believe it is the cornerstone of any successful building process. Our investment in the education of our children must reflect our commitment to the future.

We're making that investment in Mississippi. Last summer, we committed to paying our teachers as the professionals they are by enacting a teacher pay raise package that will lift the average salary rapidly over the next five years.

To attract qualified teachers to this region, we have to be able to offer them a competitive salary. We're doing that now.

Giving the children of this region the tools and the skills to compete in an increasingly technological economy is another focus of change. We are operating in a marketplace that is borderless, wireless and global.

If we are going to be successful in that marketplace, if our children are going to be able to compete in that marketplace, if the Delta region is going to be a part of that marketplace, then we must be ready today.

Through a public-private partnership, we are working to place an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in Mississippi. For the children in this area, that computer will play many roles.

It will help them learn the skills and confidence to work with ever-changing technological hardware. It will strengthen their education through access to countless sources for research and learning. It will reveal the world to them.



Building on the education issue, we have to put in place an infrastructure for growth. That infrastructure can come in several different forms – roads for transportation; water supply for homes and businesses; and technology to support the needs of new facilities.

We are aggressively working on the infrastructure issues in our 45 counties under the DRA. Five new laws passed on the recommendations of the Water and Sewer Task Force I appointed last year will positively affect the basic needs of communities and offer greater potential for new businesses.

Broadband access is being brought into areas to provide the technological foundation for meeting the demands of potential and existing businesses, as well as for residents. Again, we must be ready to compete in a wireless and global economy.

And, this summit on highway transportation will offer us a chance to shape our future work on access to the Delta region, looking at the obstacles and opportunities before us.

Businesses need and demand access to roads and rails for transporting their products, and I want to move quickly on this issue.

It's been said that "all change is not growth, just as not all movement is forward." We must remain focused in our work on creating change for growth, and moving the Delta region forward. Anything less is a disservice to those we serve.

The Delta region is full of promise, full of potential. Our work is to bring those qualities to the surface, and the time to do it is now. Thank you.