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2014 SESSION ENDS WITH BALANCED BUDGET, EFFICIENCY MEASURES, INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION

JACKSON – The Mississippi Legislature ended the 2014 session today after passing a balanced, $6 billion budget, continuing to invest in education and implementing measures to make government more transparent and efficient, Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves said.

“"In the 2014 session, the Senate focused on creating a smart, balanced budget and policies that would end wasteful spending and reflect our state’s values,” Lt. Gov. Reeves said. “I am fortunate to work alongside Speaker Gunn to create conservative policies aimed at growing Mississippi and creating more jobs in our state.”

Fiscal Year 2015 budget

The nearly $6 billion budget for the next fiscal year, which begins July 1, fills the state’s rainy day fund and spends recurring revenues on recurring expenses for the first time in more than a decade.

“We finally did what Mississippi families do every day – we are spending what we are taking in and putting more away in savings,” Lt. Gov. Reeves said.

The Fiscal Year 2015 budget also:

- Spends $20 million to repair roads and bridges and $80 million on repairs and renovations at universities, community colleges and state buildings. This funding is part of Lt. Gov. Reeves’ commitment to stop legislators from bonding repairs, such as new roofs and air conditioners, and fund those needs with appropriations.
- Funds public education at $2.4 billion, which included increased funding for the Mississippi Adequate Education Program by $74 million.
- Allocates another $25 million to the Institutions of Higher Learning over the current budget year.
- Maintains the Legislature’s commitment to community and junior colleges by including $4 million for workforce training programs.
- Increases funding by $4 million to support agricultural units, including the Mississippi State University Extension Service that supports the state’s agricultural industry.
- Boosts funds for the Department of Public Safety by $20 million over the current budget year, which includes funding for a trooper school and equipment, such as bulletproof vests. The department also has to provide the Legislature more information about its spending after a state auditor’s review of the agency raised concerns among senators.

“We need troopers who are adequately equipped on the road, so the agency’s budget was increased,” Lt. Gov. Reeves said. “However, it is imperative that the taxpayers feel their money is being spent wisely, and I am proud of the additional controls placed on DPS management.”

**Efficiency and Transparency**

The 2014 session produced several reforms aimed at eliminating waste and making state government more transparent for taxpayers. Bills that will make government more efficient are:

- Senate Bill 2503, which reinstates the moratorium on car purchases by state agencies with exceptions for emergency vehicles. A similar moratorium in 2012 saved taxpayers $9.9 million.

“When I campaigned for lieutenant governor, I promised Mississipians I would get spending under control,” Lt. Gov. Reeves said. “In one year of this moratorium, taxpayers saved $9.9 million. I am confident reinstating a moratorium on car purchases will save Mississipians even more money.”

- Senate Bill 2726 and House Bill 1318, which allow the auditor to review funds related to the BP/Deepwater Horizon disaster and economic development projects that receive taxpayer funds.
- House Bill 1365, which requires stronger reporting and an analysis of taxpayer-funded incentive programs.
- Senate Bill 2579, which reorganizes the Department of Marine Resources, removes the agency from the Personnel Board for six months, requires an annual audit of the agency and creates a chief financial officer.
- House Bill 49, which allows the state Department of Human Services to determine whether individuals enrolled in the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families use illegal drugs. If the recipient tests positive, the recipient would need to seek treatment to be eligible for benefits. The program is similar to an initiative in Utah.

**Education**

The Legislature passed a plan to pay teachers more and reward educators in schools that are showing academic progress in House Bill 504. Under the bill, current teachers will earn an additional $3,500 by July 2015 through the pay plan and statutory raises.

“The way to improve education in Mississippi is to put a quality teacher in every classroom,” Lt. Gov. Reeves said. “This plan raises starting pay to attract the best and brightest into education and establishes the first true merit pay program in the state.”
The plan:
• Raises starting pay 10 percent to $34,390 by July 2015,
• Increases the salary scale by $1,500 in July 2014 and $1,000 in July 2015, and
• Rewards teachers and staff at schools that show academic improvement each year under the School Recognition Program implemented in Fiscal Year 2017.

Mississippi’s starting pay will be $34,390 by July 2015, more than the current salary $30,900. Starting pay increases to $33,390 in July before rising again a year later. A higher starting pay combined with local salary supplements provided by most school districts could result in some teachers earning about $40,000 in their first year of teaching.

The School Recognition Program will reward teachers with additional stipends of as much as $2,000 in an academic year. The program rewards teachers and staff in schools that see academic improvement by moving up the school-rating ladder. Schools that improve a grade level under the state’s accountability model earn $100 per student. Schools that remain rated “A” each year can earn $100 per student, and schools that remain rated as “B” can receive $75 per student.

The Legislature remained committed to school safety by funding the Mississippi Community-Oriented Policing Program with $3.5 million. The program, proposed by Lt. Gov. Reeves last year, provides communities with a matching grant to place officers on school campuses. In Fiscal Year 2014, a total of 220 officers were placed at schools across Mississippi through the MCOPS program.

Also, legislators spent $1.3 million for high school juniors to take the ACT exam, which is part of the new school accountability model. The test will measure students’ preparedness for college or career.

The Legislature also passed House Bill 454 removing the Department of Education from the state personnel board for two years to allow the state superintendent and Board of Education to make the agency more efficient.

**Fighting for Mississippi values**

The Legislature took steps to protect Mississippians’ religious rights by passing Senate Bill 2681, which guarantees government cannot interfere with Mississippians’ right to exercise religion. The bill also adds “In God We Trust” to the state seal.

“Mississippians have a strong faith, which we hold dear, and this bill reflects the values I share with our citizens,” Lt. Gov. Reeves said.

The Legislature also passed House Bill 1400, which prohibits abortions after 20 weeks. Lt. Gov. Reeves said, “I am committed to making Mississippi the safest place in America for an unborn child, and I believe this bill moves us toward that goal.”

**Supporting the Second Amendment**

The Legislature passed House Bill 314, which clarifies the limits on cities and counties to restrict the carrying of firearms. The bill also prohibits the governor from taking guns in a state of
emergency and cities and counties from participating in gun buybacks unless the entities auction off any firearm received to a federally licensed dealer with proceeds reverting to government’s general fund.

“I remain committed to protecting every Mississippian’s Second Amendment rights,” Lt. Gov. Reeves said. “I’m thankful for the support of the National Rifle Association on this bill and so many other strong Second Amendment protections we’ve passed this year.”

Also, lawmakers passed Senate Bill 2425, which gives sports enthusiasts a sales tax break on firearms, ammunition, hunting supplies and fishing supplies purchased the first weekend of September. Louisiana has a similar holiday.

**Creating a business-friendly environment**

The Legislature implemented several bills to enhance Mississippi’s reputation as a place to do business and strengthen the state’s right-to-work policies.

“Mississippi’s status as a right-to-work state has played large part in our economic success and in landing major manufacturers over the past decade,” Lt. Gov. Reeves said. “These bills will protect Mississippi from a trend seen in other parts of the country where organized labor groups are using unfair negotiating tactics to bypass state laws and hurt job creation.”

The bills included:

- Senate Bill 2473 prohibits an organization, corporation or individual from damaging a business’s property and products or threatening to damage, harass or coerce a business or individual into surrendering their rights under federal labor law. It also prohibits forcing employees into neutrality agreements, card check agreements and collective bargaining recognition.
- Senate Bill 2653 prevents an organized effort to use picketing or objects, such as vehicles, to block a business’s sidewalk, entrance or exit, as well as private residences, as part of an effort in a labor dispute.
- Senate Bill 2689 ensures employers may continue to inquire about criminal history in background checks so employers can maintain a safe workplace.
- Senate Bill 2797 prevents cities and counties from using ordinances, zoning, licensure or conditions of a procurement to force employers to use organized labor.
- House Bill 799 ensures taxpayers are treated fairly under Mississippi law and streamlines the tax appeals process.