

**MISSISSIPPI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**Jackson, Mississippi**

**April 1999**

**HIGHLIGHTS OF 1999 LEGISLATIVE SESSION**

JACKSON, Miss. -- Future funding of state-run health care programs was secured with the creation of a tobacco settlement trust fund and state teachers got their largest pay increase ever to highlight the 1999 session of the Mississippi Legislature.

Mississippi became the first state in the nation to establish a health-care trust fund from an estimated \$4.1 billion gained in a lawsuit settlement with the national tobacco industry.

The House of Representatives led the way in establishment of the trust fund. A measure to create such a fund also passed the House overwhelmingly during the 1998 session, but the move failed in the Senate. The House passed a bill creating the trust fund during the first week of the 1999 session, and much later in the session the Senate agreed to the House position and the deed was done. Gov. Kirk Fordice signed the bill into law on March 31, 1999.

Under the plan, the trust fund is created with a \$280 million deposit on July 1, 1999. All tobacco settlement funds received each year will be deposited into the fund, with the principal remaining inviolate.

**THE LEGISLATURE AGREED** to spend only the interest -- and only on state-run health-care programs. For fiscal year 2000, some \$50 million in generated interest income was appropriated by lawmakers for a variety of health programs.

The amount of interest income to be spent on health programs will increase by 10 percent each fiscal year through FY 2003, and in FY 2004 and each subsequent fiscal year the amount of funds available for expenditure will be equal to the average annual earnings of the trust fund since its inception.

In FY 2004 the amount available annually will be almost \$87 million. By FY 2010 it will grow to \$141.6 million annually, and by FY 2020 there will be about \$275 million in interest available annually for medical programs.

A 13-member board was created in the legislation to direct the investment of the trust fund's principal and the expenditures. Members include the state treasurer, who will be chairman of the board; the attorney general; and one member from each congressional district to be appointed by the governor with the consent of the Senate; two nonvoting members of the Senate and one representative of the health care community appointed by the lieutenant governor; and two nonvoting members of the House of Representatives and one nonvoting representative of the health care community appointed by the speaker of the House.

First-time appropriations from the trust fund for FY 2000 include: Medicaid program expansion, \$9.5 million; Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), \$7.5 million; various mental health programs, \$7.5 million; creation of a statewide trauma care system, \$6 million; Medicaid nursing homes and home- and community-based services, \$4.795 million; community health center grants, \$4 million; dental fee increase, \$2.2 million; rehabilitation services, \$2.2 million;

disabled workers Medicaid buy-in, \$1.835 million; eyeglasses for Medicaid, \$1.7 million; miscellaneous Medicaid, \$300,000; vision testing, \$250,000; and trust fund administrative costs, \$157,700 for a total of \$49.337 million.

**TEACHERS' PAY COMPETED** with the trust fund for the most attention during the 1999 session. In the end Mississippi's average teacher salary increase was approved at 8-percent or about \$2,363 per teacher, raising the average teacher's salary to \$31,899. Salaries for assistant teachers were increased from \$8,440 to \$9,115, with supportive services going from \$4,522 to \$4,963. The bill provides an additional supportive services amount to fund the local school district's cost of per-teacher state-mandated salary increases.

The bill includes language that provides for teachers, counselors, speech-language pathologists and audiologists who meet national certification standards to receive an annual \$6,000 salary supplement. The State Department of Education will reimburse school districts for fringe benefits on all personnel receiving the salary supplement.

In addition to the pay increase, lawmakers voted to combine the state employees and public school teachers life and health insurance plans. This will for the first time provide a life insurance benefit program for educators.

The 1999 session was the last of the 1996-1999 term. More than 3,000 bills and resolutions were introduced. Many of the laws that were enacted made only technical changes to existing law, or simply extended the life of a current law or program.

Here are some other highlights:

### **State Finances**

Lawmakers adopted a fiscal year 2000 General Fund budget of \$3.456 billion (calculated at 98 percent), a 5.3 percent increase over the FY 1999 budget. There is expected to be a \$440,711 General Fund balance at June 30, 2000.

Public education (K-12, Education Television and Library Commission) programs will account for 39.28 percent of the General Fund appropriations, or \$1.357 billion, an increase of \$129.2 million over FY 1999 public education spending.

Higher education budgets (universities and two-year colleges) account for \$634.3 million or 18.36 percent of the overall General Fund budget. This is a \$79.5 million increase over FY 1999 higher education spending.

Other large state government expenditures from the General Fund for FY 2000 include: mental health facilities, \$219.4 million (6.35 percent of the General Fund budget); agriculture and economic development, \$110.3 million (3.19 percent); corrections, \$240.2 million (6.95 percent); social welfare, including Medicaid, human services and rehabilitative services, \$300.7 million (8.7 percent); military and public safety, \$82.7 million (2.4 percent); local assistance for homestead exemption reimbursement, \$78.3 million (2.27 percent); and debt service, \$158.8 million (4.6 percent).

It was stated at a meeting of the Joint Legislative Budget Committee late in the session that Mississippi's economy remained strong and there were no signs of slippage in the short-term. Revenue estimates for FY 2000 were raised during the meeting. Also, the latest revenue projections for the current fiscal year were almost met even with three months remaining in FY 1999.

## **Campaign Finance - Election Laws**

The Legislature spared no time in overriding a campaign finance reform measure that had been vetoed by Gov. Fordice at the end of the 1998 session. The veto was overridden in the 1999 session's first week and soon approved by the U.S. Justice Department, which must review any change in Mississippi election laws.

Under the bill, political parties and out-of-state political action committees must file a report on so-called "soft money" contributions, eliminating a loophole that had been used to hide campaign donations to individual candidates. The threshold for reporting campaign contributions on statewide and Supreme Court races was lowered from \$500 to \$200, giving voters a clearer view of who is financing campaigns.

More timely reports of contributions by all candidates will be required under the new law, and candidates could be fined per-day for not filing the reports. Backers of initiative issues must also file a report listing financial sponsors at the start of a petition drive. In the past, the information had to be listed only if the petition drive proved successful.

One elections issue that never got off the ground during the session was that of voter identification. Gov. Fordice was a prime backer of the bill that would have required voters to show a driver's license or some other form of ID before casting a ballot.

Lawmakers passed an absentee ballot reform measure that was hailed as one of the most important elections measures in years.

The bill restores the rights of disabled citizens to receive assistance when voting absentee. A court ruling in 1997 had declared disabled persons had no right to legal assistance in marking their ballots.

The bill also says campaign workers may not be paid "by the ballot," curtails "ballot shopping" where brokers go door-to-door offering absentee ballots, and requires anyone providing assistance to absentee voters must give his or her name on the ballot envelope. This will provide evidence to law enforcement authorities in investigating suspicious ballots.

## **City and County Affairs**

A program to continue a program to repair and replace rural bridges with a sufficiency rating of 50 or less was extended during the 1999 session.

Lawmakers voted to appropriate \$10 million for FY 2000 and \$20 million each legislative session thereafter through FY 2008 to fund the program. The appropriation is tied to a growth factor in state revenues that must be met to trigger the action. Counties annually must file with the State Aid engineer a four-year plan of bridge replacement and rehabilitation. The plan shall specify the condition of the existing bridges included in the project.

Mississippi is among the nation's leaders in the number of local bridges said to be in need of rehabilitation.

Other local government legislation:

--Expenses of the Office of State Aid Road Construction will be reimbursed from the Economic Development Highway Fund and the Local System Bridge Replacement Fund. In the past, the expenses were paid from the Office of State Aid's appropriation bill, which reduced funds going to counties for state aid projects.

Lawmakers also voted to increase to \$4 million monthly the amount of fuel taxes diverted to the State Aid Road Fund for local projects.

--Individual county supervisors, not an entire county, will now be held accountable for violations of the county unit system of government. In the past, a whole county could be held responsible and lose state dollars -- particularly for local road programs -- if just one of the elected officials ran afoul of the law. Now, the one supervisor will be singled out and could be subjected to a civil fine up to \$5,000.

--Chancery and circuit clerks who serve less than one year will in the future be paid on a pro-rata basis. The bill also states that after Jan. 1, 2000, no chancery or circuit clerk can make more than \$83,160 annually.

--County assessment rolls in the future will be maintained on computers under a bill passed this year. County tax rolls historically have been maintained in burdensome, heavy-bound books that were a source of irritation for anyone desiring to peruse the rolls.

--Cities may issue payment for utility refunds immediately after determining that all services and obligations have been paid by the customer. In the past, cities usually waited several weeks and possibly months before issuing the refunds.

--Economic development of cities will be enhanced by a law allowing the governing authorities to donate to programs like Main Street Inc. that promote central business districts.

### **Crime, Courts and Corrections**

The Legislature provided \$24.5 million to open 1,500 new prison beds at a 500-inmate special needs prison in Lauderdale County and four 250-inmate regional prisons. Lawmakers also approved \$250,000 to expand the house arrest program by 250 inmates.

Also:

--Lawmakers voted to provide that a state prisoner who is in trusty status may be awarded earned time in addition to any other reduction in his or her sentence. The extra earned time will be awarded at a rate of 10 days' reduction for each 30 days of participation in approved prison work programs.

--Counties that are holding state prisoners will be reimbursed under a bill that provides \$191.9 million in an additional appropriation to the State Department of Corrections for the 1999 fiscal year ending June 30.

--Public employees will be protected under the "Whistleblower Act" when they in good faith report acts of impropriety or illegal government actions allegedly committed by fellow employees or higher-ups. The bill sets out a procedure for filing and investigation of complaints against such acts as embezzlement, abuse of authority, waste, loss or misuse of public funds or discrimination.

Any whistleblower who is subjected to workplace reprisal or retaliatory action is entitled to seek remedies in court in addition to receiving back pay and job recovery in the event of termination. Conversely, actions can be taken against an employee who intentionally files improper complaints against co-workers.

--Family courts will be abolished and merged into the county court system where they exist. The law primarily affects Harrison County, whose family court judge becomes a county court judge for the remainder of the current term.

--Youth court laws were clarified so that after an offender's case is adjudicated, the case may be transferred for disposition to the county where the child resides. The bill also says the State Department of Health may release findings of investigations into allegations of child abuse at day care centers. The findings can be turned over to parents of children attending the center or to parents who are considering enrolling a child in the affected day care center. The bill also requires that sex offense criminal records of employees be compiled and turned over to the State Department of Public Safety.

--A bill was passed requiring directors of child residential homes to swear by affidavit that they have obtained criminal background checks on all employees and volunteers.

--A law was extended that provides for the appointment of legal counsel for indigent offenders.

--State prisoners being transported must be separated from the officers by a so-called "Biddle Guard," a screen named for a law enforcement official killed several years while moving a prisoner. Law agencies that fail to follow the new law can be fined up to \$1,500.

--Penalties were created for persons who fill their vehicles with gasoline and drive away without paying for it.

--Training was mandated for new county jailers hired after Jan. 1, 2000.

--A training program will also be created for auxiliary law enforcement officers, who will be able to undergo the training in their home area.

--A law enforcement officers' death benefits fund was established to pay to survivors of sworn officers who are accidentally or killed in the line of duty. The benefit was set initially at \$10,000.

### **Economic Development, Business, Industry and Agriculture**

South Mississippi leaders for years had sought funds for a center that combined industrial training and lifelong learning skills. As a result of legislation this session, they in effect got two.

The Southeast Mississippi Center for Advanced Technology Partnership was passed and will operate at two sites: the Jones County Technology Park in Ellisville and the Hattiesburg-Forrest County Industrial Park in Hattiesburg. Jones County Junior College and Pearl River Community College will be responsible for developing the sites along with various economic development and governmental groups in the Pine Belt area.

Each center will offer courses and programs, with distinctive technology focuses that employers can access. Citizens will benefit from industrial training, workshops, seminars and academic programs offering college credits and continuing education programs.

The two sites will be financed through \$4 million in general obligation bonds at each, with the local communities also putting up a 25-percent financial match. Each center will have an advisory council that will develop program standards. Academic, industrial and business leaders from the areas will comprise the advisory councils.

The centers will be similar in focus to projects completed or underway in Tupelo and Greenville.

**Another major economic** development project involves a loan program to develop the historic Farish Street business district in downtown Jackson. Gov. Fordice vetoed a similar bill after the 1988 session, but approved it this year.

The bill makes \$6 million in low-interest business development loans available to entrepreneurs. Farish Street was once the major business and financial center for minorities in Jackson and developers foresee a return to that activity with the passage of this legislation.

The Legislature also passed bills to:

--Transfer from the State Department of Education to the State Board for Community and Junior Colleges about \$8 million worth of state-funded industrial training programs and post-secondary adult short-term training programs that had been administered by the Department of Education. Further moves to consolidate all workforce development programs under one agency were not approved during the session.

--Provide \$9 million in bonds to fund improvements for the Hancock County Port and Harbor Commission and the Stennis Space Center. The project includes the construction of utilities, roads, parking, wastewater treatment and additions to facilities.

--Provide \$8 million in bonds to pay the costs of repairs, renovations and improvements at the Tri-State Commerce Park in Tishomingo County, also known as the Yellow Creek industrial facility, where rocket parts are manufactured.

--Put up bonds totaling \$20 million for improvements to State Highway 67 in an area where a "master planned community" is being planned that will help alleviate a critical housing shortage on the Gulf Coast. The road improvements will involve a portion of Highway 67 in Harrison County between U.S. 49 and I-110. A tract of about 4,500 acres is being developed for the massive housing community that could include as many as 5,000 homes. Numerous permanent jobs would also be created with the development of retail centers within the planned community.

--Increase the amount of funds available in the successful Emerging Crops Fund from \$16 million to \$24 million, with a major emphasis to be directed at minority farmers. A major focus is a sweet potato project in the Delta region.

--Provide \$11.4 million to advertise and promote tourism and economic development opportunities in Mississippi. Another issue of \$500,000 was approved to partially fund a Spanish art exhibition.

--Provide \$21.6 million for infrastructure development at the Port of Gulfport.

### **Public Education, K-12**

With the realization early in the session that K-12 teachers would receive their largest pay raise in history, the remainder of public education debate centered on activities within the classrooms, and one of the bills was at one point termed "one of the most important matters" lawmakers would ever vote on.

That measure will increase accountability scrutiny on not only entire school districts, but individual schools as well for the first time.

One major change would involve basic skills achievement tests. The bill mandates the tests -- which are generally administered beginning in the third grade and then in several other years until high school graduation -- are to be based on curriculum taught in Mississippi school, instead of outside the state. The

minimum academic skill tests would be developed by the State Board of Education. Tests would generally be taken in the spring, not at the beginning of a new school term when some subject matter has yet to be covered.

Another major change involves accreditation of schools. Currently, accreditation is given only for an entire school district, but under the proposal individual schools within a district would come under accreditation scrutiny, and would be held accountable for student growth and performance. Each school will set annual performance standards and then measure the performance of the school against itself.

Schools that exceed their standards would be properly recognized by the state department, while schools failing the standards would draw state assistance and possible intervention.

The bill would allow Mississippi's governor to declare a "state of emergency" in a school district for a variety of reasons, including financial problems, academic woes and a lack of school safety. In some extreme cases, whole school districts could be abolished under the plan and the students either disbursed to a neighboring district or to a district reorganized by the state.

Conservators would be assigned to the troubled districts and given the authority for financial obligations, hiring and firing of all personnel, contractual agreements and generally running the day-to-day activities of the district. The conservator would be paid similar to what the superintendent had been paid.

**On other K-12 issues, the Legislature voted to:**

--Establish the Mississippi School of the Arts in Brookhaven on the former campus of Whitworth College for artistically inclined 11th and 12th grade students. Almost \$12 million in general obligation funds were authorized to create the residential campus. The school will provide curricula teaching the humanities, creative writing, literature, theater, music, dance and visual arts.

The school will open with an 11th grade class in 2001-2002, with juniors and seniors accepted the following year. The State Board of Education will govern the school and the state superintendent will appoint a nine-member advisory panel to assist in developing the school plan.

To the extent possible, the school will enter into an agreement with the Brookhaven School District to teach some academic courses to the arts students. The school may contract with various arts organizations across the state, such as the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra, to enhance the facility's services.

--Create a 25-member task force of lawmakers and education experts to study early childhood services in the state. The group would make a report to the next legislative session on how Mississippi might move in this direction. Experts say children who receive quality early childhood services have high academic and social ratings and better attendance records that will help them succeed in kindergarten and throughout their educational experience.

The program that is developed will emphasize growth in language and literacy, math concepts, science, arts, physical development and personal and social competency skills.

--Develop a pilot program to assist in creating community-based family support centers/family or parent education services, designed to improve the lives of families and children in the state. A center will be established in each congressional district. Some of the activities the programs may focus on include

parenting classes, developmental programs for kindergarten-age children, resource libraries, school readiness and early literacy.

--Delete the requirement that the three occasions of a student having head lice must be consecutive before the State Health Department may provide assistance in treating the lice condition. Once the department intervenes, it will instruct parents or guardians on how to treat the lice and prevent its recurrence. The health agency may also charge the parents or guardians a fee for providing treatment and counseling.

--Establish the Beginning Principal Support Pilot Program to assist in the development of school principals who have served fewer than 180 days total as a principal. The program's "mentor principals" could be someone who is presently under contract as a principal or who is retired from a school district.

--Authorize school districts to hire retired teachers as "mentor teachers" for the Beginning Teacher Support Program. The mentors can perform such services as classroom observation and consultation, assist in planning and preparing course work and assist in delivering the courses.

--Encourage public school districts to include "character education" in their curriculum, and permits local school boards to devise the course. Such traits as honesty, kindness, forgiveness and patriotism could be taught under the plan.

--Authorize the Mississippi National Guard to award adult high school diplomas to participants in the Youth Challenge Program. The program is aimed at "at-risk" students who can earn the diploma by meeting the requirements of the General Education Development (GED) program.

--Require the State Board of Education to develop, before the 1999-2000 school year, a program for the teaching of personal money management skills at the secondary level. The program could include courses on such subjects as balancing a checkbook, completing a loan application, dealing with salesmen and merchants, computing income tax returns and contesting an incorrect billing statement.

--Extended the School Nurse Intervention Program that allows each school district to apply for state matching funds to employ a school nurse who would coordinate various prevention projects including child abuse and neglect identification, scoliosis screening, nutrition education, hearing and vision screening and teen pregnancy prevention.

--Addressed school attendance officers by awarding them the same pay increase as other state employees (\$1,500 across the board), and establishing a personal leave and medical leave policy for them. The officers shall maintain regular office hours on a year-round basis, but will not be required to work on days school teachers are not required to work during the school term. However, on official state holidays when teachers are required to work, the attendance officers must also work.

--Created a board to study residential "rescue centers" for at-risk students. Its purpose is to study the need for a comprehensive system of care and services for compulsory-school-age children. A report will be made to the 2000 Legislature.

### **Higher Education**

Pay raises of 7.5 percent for higher education staffers and 8 percent for two-year system staffers were approved by lawmakers -- among the largest salary

increases ever approved. University Medical Center personnel also will get a 7.5 percent increase.

A move to expand course offerings at the University of Southern Mississippi's Gulf Park campus was debated often during the session. Lawmakers were ready to move ahead immediately with the plan, but a federal judge's ruling late in the session posed a hurdle. Final legislation, however, includes language to spend \$500,000 in FY 2000 to offer freshman and sophomore courses at the campus if given the go-ahead by the federal courts, Legislature or State College Board. It was apparent from debate that a complete four-year campus will someday soon be a reality at USM-Gulf Park.

In other higher education matters, lawmakers voted to:

--Appropriate \$12 million to be split among Alcorn State, Jackson State and Mississippi Valley State universities for further implementation of the Ayers desegregation case settlement.

--Several college tuition programs were strengthened and clarified, including the highly popular Mississippi Prepaid Affordable College Tuition Program (IMPACT). More than \$30 million is provided for student financial aid programs serving 29,000 students annually.

--Spend an extra \$5 million above other appropriations to help the three comprehensive universities compete with comparable institutions in surrounding states.

--Provide \$6 million for six new and renovated facilities at University Medical Center.

--Provide \$70 million in general obligation bond funding to repair and renovate facilities at the eight universities and their auxiliary campuses, and \$15 million for R&R at the two-year college campuses.

### **Public Health**

Few Mississippi legislative sessions have recorded gains in public health of the state's citizens to match the programs passed in 1999.

The tobacco trust fund will serve as the linchpin to the other health care programs. The Legislature also voted to:

--Expand the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) by increasing the maximum amount that a family may earn for its children to be eligible. The maximum was raised from 133 percent of the federal poverty level (\$21,879 for a family of four) to 200 percent of the poverty level (\$32,900). The plan will cover an estimated 85,000 children.

The Division of Medicaid was directed to develop a CHIP enrollment outreach program in cooperation with other state agencies and health-related groups.

--Expand the Medicaid-eligible beds in eight counties by converting 345 beds to the program. In addition, 1,560 new nursing home beds in 26 counties were authorized over the next four years. During FY 2000 two counties -- Amite and Carroll -- currently without a nursing home will receive a certificate of need for construction of such a facility.

During the next two fiscal years, CONs will be issued for the construction or conversion of 240 nursing home beds in each of the four Long-Term Care Planning Districts designated in the State Health Plan to provide care for patients

with Alzheimer's disease. Also, any nursing home will be allowed to designate existing beds for patients with Alzheimer's.

The State Division of Medicaid is directed to implement a referral process for long-term care alternatives to nursing home care. No Medicaid beneficiary may be admitted to a nursing home unless a physician certifies that nursing home care is appropriate. If Medicaid determines that a home- or community-based setting is proper and cost-effective, the division will advise the applicant. that such a setting is appropriate and provide a proposed plan of care for the applicant.

--Allow disabled workers whose incomes are above the Medicaid eligibility threshold but below 250 percent of the federal poverty level to purchase Medicaid coverage on a sliding fee scale.

--Increase from 100 percent of the federal poverty level to 135 percent the resources limit for persons 65 and over to be eligible for Medicaid benefits, effective July 1, 1999.

--Authorize up to 10 prescriptions per month for Medicaid recipients with the division's approval, an increase from five prescriptions per month. Also, Medicaid reimbursement is authorized for one pair of eyeglasses every three years.

--Increase Medicaid payments for physician and dentists to encourage more medical doctors to treat eligible patients.

--Increase the number of annual leave days that patients in nursing and intermediate care facilities may take for Medicaid reimbursement purposes. For nursing facilities, the number of permitted leave days was increased to 52 days per year, while the number was increased to 84 days for intermediate care facilities.

--Require the State Department of Health to develop annually a list of potentially non-viable community public water systems. The state agency will be required to offer the affected systems assistance at no cost.

--Establish the Mississippi Qualified Health Center Grant Program to make service grants for the medical care of uninsured or medically indigent patients.

--Mandate training for any person authorized to use an automated external defibrillator, a device employed on someone in cardiac arrest.

--Clarify the authority of surrogates to approve medical care and treatment of patients for whom no other surrogate is available to make a health-care decision. The bill permits the director of a state mental hospital to make such a decision, or an owner, operator or employee of a long-term residential health-care facility who is related to the patient by blood, marriage or adoption.

--Authorize the issuance of a certificate of need for the establishment of a comprehensive cancer center to any hospital licensed for at least 250 acute-care beds and located in an area where no such facility exists.

--Require that chiropractors who perform insurance claim reviews or independent reviews must be licensed in Mississippi and meet stringent continuing education criteria.

### **Human Services**

--Created the Mississippi Reducing Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancies Incentive Grant Fund to provide financial incentives to counties to reduce out-of-wedlock birth rates as required by federal welfare reform legislation. The awards will range from \$100,000 to \$500,000.

--Recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) will get an increase from \$60 per month to \$110 for the first family member.

--Foster parents were granted limited liability coverage under the State Tort Claims Act to guard them against claims of inadequate care of a foster child.

--Lawmakers provided \$639,000 to staff and open the new 250-bed facility at the Oakley Training Center, which is a \$13 million state of the art detention facility.

--The Adolescent Offender Program was funded with \$600,000. It is a community-based delinquency prevention program offering delinquency intervention and family counseling.

--Foster board payments were increased by \$100 per month.

--Special funds were provided to add 51 time-limited social worker positions to help with a large caseload in child protective services.

### **Insurance**

--The furor that arose last year after insurance companies charged Gulf Coast residents with a 2-percent "hurricane deductible" was resolved in a law requiring the companies to offer what is known as a "buy-back provision" to cover the cost of the storm-initiated deductible. The deductible comes into play when a named storm strikes the state, as happened last year with Georges.

Under the plan, insurance companies may ask the State Department of Insurance to allow them to drop the buy-back provision if they can prove it has an adverse on the company or policyholders.

--The fourth round of the ever-popular Rural Fire Truck Acquisition Program was enacted to help more communities purchase fire trucks. Also, lawmakers provided \$1.5 million to complete the third round of the program. The program assists counties and small municipalities to purchase fire protection equipment they might not otherwise can afford. Under the plan, counties may receive no more than \$200,000 and must match each \$50,000 contribution from the state.

--A bill was passed to prohibit domestic insurance companies from making loans to any stockholder, officer or director of the company from certain funds or investments. Some types of loans or other contractual rights to which a person has a legal right will not be prohibited.

--Nonresident agents will no longer be required to utilize the services of a resident agent in soliciting, negotiating or selling insurance policies in the state. Another bill removes the requirement that insurance agents must be a state resident to countersign policies for nonresident agents. The bill also deletes the requirement that commissions be divided between resident and nonresident agents on the sale of some policies.

--Risk retention and risk purchasing groups will be required to pay annual filing fees of \$500 and \$250, respectively, to the State Department of Insurance. The groups must also file a list of premiums written on risks in Mississippi by March 1 of each year.

### **Military Affairs**

--The maximum amount a veteran may borrow from the Veterans Home and Purchase Board was raised to \$95,000 from \$80,000.

--Funding to complete the funding of a new headquarters building for the Veterans Home Purchase Board was approved.

--Lawmakers provided \$1.1 million in state funds and \$4.6 million in federal funds to construct an armory in Brookhaven.

--The Legislature approved \$184,000 to operate the newly constructed Armed Forces Museum at Camp Shelby near Hattiesburg.

--Care at the State Veterans Homes in Jackson, Kosciusko, Collins and Oxford was enhanced with \$3.7 million in funding.

--The Legislature appropriated \$235,000 as the state's contribution toward the national WWII Memorial in Washington. The Legislature also provided \$15,000 for a Women in Military Service memorial.

--Members of the Mississippi National Guard are now considered in-state residents for college tuition purposes.

--A bridge over I-59 in Hattiesburg and Lamar County was designated as the "Military Order of the Purple Heart Memorial Bridge" to honor the 900 Purple Heart recipients from Mississippi. Purple Heart recipients' automobile tags will be exempted from taxation.

--All males between the ages of 18 and 26 must register with the Selective Service in order to be eligible to apply for a job in state government.

### **Public Safety**

The State Crime Lab was provided \$2.6 million in extra funding to fill 30 vacant positions with a goal of reducing the current backlog of 9,000 cases. The agency's facilities also will be expanded.

The Legislature provided \$1.4 million to fund a 50-person cadet class in FY 2000 with a goal of providing 24-hour coverage of state highways. A 33-cadet class graduated near the end of the session. Lawmakers also gave highway patrolmen and narcotics officers a \$1,000 pay hike in addition to the regular state employee pay raise.

The Bureau of Narcotics was expanded by 29 new agents and 12 support positions, with a goal of having two agents per county.

Another appropriation of \$200,000 will begin the Law Enforcement Officers Death Benefits Trust Fund.

### **Taxes**

--Self-employed persons who purchase medical insurance for themselves, spouse and dependents will be allowed a state income tax deduction.

--Private landowners who follow approved reforestation practices on their lands will be allowed a state income tax credit up to a maximum of \$10,000 during the taxpayer's lifetime. --Corporations engaged in programs to contain and clean up oil spills along the Mississippi Gulf Coast will be exempted from property taxes.

--The sales tax on truck-tractors and semi-trailers used in interstate commerce was lowered to 3 percent of the portion of the sale that is attributable to the equipment's usage in Mississippi. The 3-percent tax is the same levied on the sale of automobiles, aircraft, other types of trucks and mobile homes in Mississippi. Lowering the rate of sales tax is expected to be an economic boon for state truck dealers.

--A bill was passed to provide for the issuance of certificates of titles for manufactured homes and mobile homes.

## **Transportation**

--Lawmakers voted to add a segment of Highway 57 in Jackson County to phase four of the 1987 Four-Laning Program. The section begins at the intersection of Highway 57 and I-10 and extends northward 10 miles to near Van Cleave.

--A bill was amended to include \$200,000 for repairs to a portion of Highway 32 in Yalobusha County extending north to the entrance of George Payne Cossar State Park.

--Spillway Road across the Ross Barnett Reservoir will have a "reversible" third lane to help traffic flow in one of the state's fastest growing areas. The state owns the spillway across the large lake that's located in parks of Hinds, Rankin and Madison counties. The roadway will alternate using two of the three lanes for morning and evening traffic.

--A segment of Mississippi 44 in Lawrence and Marion counties was added to the designated state highway system for maintenance purposes.

--New four-lane construction is planned for a segment of State Highway 7 in Lafayette County, giving relief to a heavily-traveled road used not only by area citizens going to work but by football fans headed to the University of Mississippi campus.

--The amount of state bond money available for road projects under the Economic Development Highway Fund was increased from \$105 million to \$140 million.

--The massive 1987 Four-Lane Highway Program was enhanced with a bill that provides for the issuance of refunding bonds for temporary borrowing. The action is designed to make sure the program stays on track even when the revenue to fund it is insufficient to fund the construction priorities.

--A law prohibiting the State Transportation Commission from spending more than 7/12ths of its budget for highway maintenance during an election year or from letting a contract during the last six months of a commissioner's term was deleted.

--Vehicles hauling unprocessed forest products on public roads, streets or highways, other than interstate highways, can have an outside load width of not more than 9.5 feet, an increase from a width of 8.5 feet, if such products cannot be shortened without rendering them useless for the planned end product.

--A bill targeted toward Amish citizens, mostly in Pontotoc County, will allow them to use reflectorized tape on their slow-moving vehicles, rather than the gaudy orange triangular emblems, for safety purposes.

## **Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks**

One of the most discussed bills of the session was a measure that establishes a program to preserve and protect the state's scenic streams and rivers through the "Mississippi Scenic Streams Stewardship Act."

In passing the law, the Legislature found that certain state streams possess "unique or outstanding scenic, recreational, geological, botanical, fish, wildlife, historic or cultural values," thus deserve action while "protecting the private property rights of landowners."

Under the plan, streams and rivers will be nominated for the program by any citizen, group, state agency or local government and request the State

Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks to evaluate the body of water. If the state department finds it meets the program criteria, the stream will be recommended to the Legislature for inclusion in the program. A public hearing will then be held in the stream's locale. Ultimately, a cooperative stewardship plan for the stream will be developed among various agencies. The plan will utilize "best management practices" to maintain the scenic values of the stream while ensuring the rights of landowners to continue existing agriculture, forestry, water supply, recreational, commercial and industrial uses.

Lawmakers stressed that no landowners will be forced to participate in the program and those that do can leave the program on 30 days' notice.

Streams that were designated in the bill for a pilot program to kick off the program include Wolf River, Black Creek, Okatoma Creek, Strong River, Pearl River and Buttahatchie River.

**In other outdoors/wildlife/recreation matters, lawmakers voted to:**

--A \$16 million general obligation bond bill was passed to fund capital improvement projects at state park and game management facilities across the state. Backers noted that while Mississippi has one of the finest state park systems in the country, too many years have passed between repair and renovation programs.

The bill will provide funding for such projects as repairs to dams, roads, administration buildings, manager residences and cabins at various state park and game sites. Also included is funding to build new state lakes in Copiah and George counties.

Proponents said a study reveals hunting and fishing as the fifth largest industry in the state, with only manufacturing, welfare, agriculture and gaming surpassing its economic impact. In fiscal 1997, the state wildlife/parks agency issued more than 600,000 hunting licenses and 130,000 fishing licenses for total collections of more than \$13 million. The report shows that from July 1997 through June 1998, some 2.7 million people visited the state parks and paid \$39.7 million in user fees.

--Construct a golf course at a fourth state park. It will be built at Hugh White State Park near Grenada on lands owned by the federal government. Grenada leaders had a feasibility study done that predicts the same success being enjoyed by golf operations at LeFleur's Bluff State Park near Sardis, Percy Quin State Park near McComb and LeFleur's Bluff State Park in Jackson.

--Require proof of residency to obtain a resident hunting or fishing license. Driver's licenses were added as a document one must use in obtaining one of the wildlife licenses. Nonstate residents in the past have abused the privilege of an outdoors licenses in Mississippi and under the new law anyone applying for a driver's licenses must first prove their residency. In-state game licenses are less expensive than those for nonresidents.

--Revised penalties for willfully disfiguring any part of a public levee system. The bill was intended to stop offenses against the Mississippi River levee system. Violators who do anything to the levees can now be fined up to \$1,000.

--Created the Metro Recreational Highway Authority for the cities of Pearl, Flowood, Richland and Jackson to do a study of recreational opportunities between the Pearl River levees within those municipalities.

--Clarified a law allowing the selling of skins of fur-bearing and predatory animals during trapping season. Also, the meat of legally acquired raccoons and muskrats may also be bought and sold during trapping season.

--Extended the regulation of hunting and fishing guide services by the State Wildlife Commission and established fees for guide services at \$150 and for outfitters licenses not to exceed \$250 annually.

--Transferred marine law enforcement duties from the state game agency to the Department of Marine Resources. Also, \$5 million in tideland funds was allocated for 33 projects on the Gulf Coast.

### **Other Bond Issue Projects**

Several public buildings, and historical or educational projects, were approved by the 1999 Legislature in addition to the bond issue for R&R at state universities and colleges and within the state parks/game management areas system.

Among the other projects:

--\$10 million to construct a new headquarters building for the Mississippi Library Commission and \$10 million to award grants to local libraries across the state.

--\$20 million to construct a justice facility in Jackson to serve as the home of the Mississippi Supreme Court, the Court of Appeals and the State Law Library.

--\$9.5 million for improvements to the Department of Public Safety headquarters in Jackson.

--\$2 million for improvements to the State Data Center in Jackson.

--\$2.5 million for improvements at the old Walthall School Building in Hattiesburg where a children's discovery center will be established.

--\$2 million for the Annette S. O'Keefe addition to the George E. Ohr Arts Museum on the Gulf Coast.

--\$200,000 for improvements to the Grand Opera House in Meridian.

--\$300,000 for a historical project in Calhoun County to improve the home of former Gov. Dennis Murphree to establish a welcome center and genealogy center.

--\$200,000 for restoration of the Boler Inn in Union in Newton County, a former stage coach stop that dates to the 1860's.

--\$100,000 to restore the Heflin House in Sardis for use as a museum.

--\$100,000 to restore the old railroad station depot in Water Valley.

--\$200,000 for improvements to the Old Waveland Elementary School.

--\$50,000 to restore the former Post Office building in New Albany for community use.

--\$2 million to be matched by local, federal or private funds to establish a Children's Museum on State Fairgrounds property in Jackson.

--\$2.5 million for improvements to conservation and recreation programs in the Pat Harrison Waterway District in Southeast Mississippi.

--\$3.2 million for a project with cooperation of the federal government to restore the bluffs along the Mississippi River in Natchez.

### **Miscellaneous**

--The Public Employees Retirement Fund was stabilized and improved to enhance benefits for retirees. The 13th check that retirees receive as a cost of living allowance will never be less than the amount received this year. The bill

also improves benefits for employees who decide to remain in public service after the 25-year minimum. Each time an improvement in benefits is implemented, the benefit of those already retired will be recomputed to take into account the change.

--Bingo operators will not have to go through a so-called "middle man" to obtain a lease, which should result in more funds being directed to charitable groups.

--Funding of \$150,000 was approved for an oral history project of the State Department of Archives and History. Under the bill, the University of Southern Mississippi and the Mississippi Humanities Council will work together to collect interviews from state residents concerning their communities, governmental life and historical events.

--The state archives agency will create a landmark grant program to ensure the preservation of properties designated as Mississippi landmarks. Cities and counties will be allowed to contribute to the fund.

--Water heaters even got in line for a law. The Legislature passed a bill that says water heaters must be able to withstand a temperature of 225 degrees. Old law required a standard of 400 degrees and manufacturers complained that special water heaters must be built to sell in Mississippi, which had been the only state requiring the 400-degree standard.

--Members of such organizations as 4-H Clubs and Future Farmers of America will be allowed free use of agriculture arenas built around the state in recent years.

--Nonresident funeral directors will be allowed to remove a body or conduct a funeral or burial service in this state provided that the other state has a reciprocal agreement with Mississippi.

--The amount of time for recovery of damages for cutting trees without consent of a landowner was increased to 24 months.

--Dozens of "local and private" bills were passed allowing cities and counties to donate to local programs such as youth baseball and crimestoppers, enhance local economic development programs or levy taxes on motel and food for promotion purposes.