



Mississippi House of Representatives Weekly Summary

2014 Regular Legislative Session

End of Session Summary

The 2014 Regular Session of the Mississippi Legislature was a whirlwind 90-day session that even included one Extraordinary Special Session. Deadlines were pushed up, and it proceeded at a much faster pace than 2012's 120-day session. But despite the shorter session, the House ended the 2014 Legislative session on Wednesday, April 2 - a full four days ahead of the scheduled April 6 deadline for Sine Die, saving the tax payers of Mississippi approximately \$143,000.

Conservative Budget, Bonding

When crafting the budget, many legislators focused their efforts on eliminating the dependency on one-time monies for recurring expenses. Since 2012, members have diligently worked to reduce this, and the proposed Fiscal Year (FY) General Fund 2015 budget reflects that. The FY 2015 General Fund budget demanded a lot of attention and nurturing as it was crafted throughout the 2014 Session. House and Senate members were able to reach an agreement on a General Fund budget of approximately \$6 billion.

Some key agencies receiving a funding increase include:

- K-12 Education--\$2.4 billion, up 3.7 percent, with the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) component alone totaling \$2.1 billion, up by \$74.6 million, or 3.6 percent.
- Universities--\$746 Million, up 4.6 percent
- Community and Junior Colleges--\$258 million, up 4.5 percent
- Mental Health--\$244.6 million, up 2.9 percent
- Corrections--\$346 million, up 2.4 percent.
- Public Safety--\$88 million, up 21 percent, including \$6.9 million for a Trooper School.
- State Aid Roads-Bridge Program—\$52 million, up 160 percent.

With the slight uptick in the economy, many state agencies requested pay raises for their employees. Some of these agencies will see a portion of their funding increase set aside specifically for state employees who make under \$30,000. These employees will receive a \$1,000 raise.

House members also adopted a plan to issue \$199 million in general obligation bonds for various projects. In order to raise funds, bonds are often issued. Many people believe bonds are necessary to help fund large projects with the intent to repay the debts over time. Included in this plan was a provision to allow IHL to have level funding of their construction projects without necessitating an annual visit to the Legislature. Additional projects covered include: portions of the Civil Rights Museum in Jackson and Cooper Tire in Tupelo.



Mississippi House of Representatives Weekly Summary

Education

Once again, legislators placed continued importance on reforming Mississippi's education system. The issue of a teacher pay raise garnered quite a bit of attention this year in the form of House Bill 504 (HB504). Teachers last received a pay raise in FY 2008. Speaker Gunn and the House of Representatives led the charge and deemed this a top priority before the Session began. Nearly \$60 million of the education budget goes toward this increase. Details of the plan include:

- A \$1,500 salary increase starting July 1, 2014.
- A \$1,000 salary increase starting July 1, 2015.
- A merit-based pay system for teachers in the third year for "A" and "B" schools or any school that improves one letter grade in a year.
- The legislature shall develop a pay plan for high-performing teachers in "C", "D" and "F" schools by the third year.
- Money must be spent on teacher salaries and cannot go toward equipment.

Approximately \$1.3 million was also set aside to allow high school juniors to have the option of taking the ACT as their high school exit exam.

In 2012, House members passed a measure that delayed the school start date, pushing it to the third Monday in August. This year, they essentially abolished that effort and returned control of start date decisions to local school districts.

The legislature also provided updates to the manner in which school board members are elected. The changes provide for a uniform procedure for a nominating petition.

Reassuring Public Safety

During the 2013 Legislative Session, a 21-member Corrections and Criminal Justice Task Force was formed to develop policies to improve public safety, reduce repeat offenders, restore certainty and clarity to the sentencing process, and control corrections costs. Governor Bryant called on the 2014 Legislative Session to focus on public safety. This year, the findings of the bipartisan, inter-branch task force included several different reforms in the form of HB585, which was signed into law during the last week of the Session. The provisions institute true minimums for time served; give more authority to judges; provide standards for alternative sentencing, drug courts and veterans courts; and are anticipated to save Mississippi close to \$266 million over 10 years.

With \$6.9 million of the Department of Public Safety's budget going toward a new Trooper school, Mississippians can anticipate safer roads, as well. The last trooper school was funded in 2011. The Mississippi Highway Patrol is roughly 150 troopers short of the needed 600 troopers on the road. Another 130 troopers are currently eligible for retirement.



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The legislature also provided funding increases for 16 additional Assistant District Attorneys in various high-case load areas around Mississippi and drug courts.

Second Amendment Rights

Due to the continued tightening of Second Amendment rights in states around the nation, the leadership introduced and passed several bills focused on protecting those rights.

- SB2425 offers a sales tax exemption on the sale of firearms, ammunition and hunting supplies during the Second Amendment Weekend holiday, beginning the first Friday in September.
- HB764 allows disabled veterans to acquire a gun permit at no cost.
- HB314 confirms that state law preempts local ordinances as it relates to possess weapons. It essentially expands protections against government confiscation of legally-possessed firearms during a state of emergency or natural disaster.

Focusing on Health and Wellness

Many pieces of legislation focused on the health and wellness of the state's citizens. One of the first bills passed and signed into law this year was the "Youth Concussion Law." Discussions around the country prompted this legislation which will protect students with concussions from participating in school-sponsored events. Students will only be allowed to resume participation in the event after being cleared by a health-care provider. Mississippi was the only state without laws in place to protect students with concussions.

Statistics from the CDC were released in late March stating that one in 68 children is on the Autism spectrum. HB542 requires the State and School Employees Health Insurance Plan to include coverage for treatment of autism spectrum disorders. Members voted unanimously to pass the measure.

Because access to healthcare in many areas of Mississippi is limited, Senate Bill (SB) 2829 allows the 15 community mental health centers in Mississippi to begin seeing primary care patients. This provision would allow mental healthcare physicians the authority to also treat patients for primary healthcare needs. Each clinic would have the opportunity to invest in this practice or refrain from it as no money is being appropriated.

Further measures passed by legislators include banning abortions at or after the 20-week mark; adding "In God We Trust" to the state seal; and increasing the death benefits of firefighters, police officers, emergency management personnel, and members of the Fire Academy who are killed in the line of duty from \$65,000 to \$100,000.

Pro-Business, Pro-Economic Growth



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Several bills were brought forward this session which supported Mississippi businesses and fostered an atmosphere of transparency within state agencies. Creating jobs and incentives for new companies remains a focus of the House and Senate legislative leadership. Many of the pro-business bills passed included tax exemptions for various industries.

HB785 offers a sales tax exemption and an income tax credit to companies moving their headquarters to Mississippi. They must create at least 20 jobs to qualify.

In the spirit of the pro-business atmosphere favored by legislative leadership, House members passed SB2394 that allows corporations to purchase lands sold or forfeited to the state for delinquent taxes. This legislation addresses, specifically in urban areas, condemned and run-down properties. Purchase of these properties may help revitalize areas.

Members also sought to strengthen the Mississippi's right-to-work atmosphere through several pieces of legislation.

- SB2473 creates the "Prohibition Against Employer Intimidation Act." This act would prohibit organizations and individuals from harassing, making threats, or damaging property of businesses. The bill also prohibits treble (triple) damages.
- SB2653 deals with mass picketing. It would forbid labor unions, unions or their agencies from mass picketing of a residence or place of business if doing so interferes with entering or exiting the residence or business.
- SB2689 prohibits local governments from limiting background checks by employers. This bill allows background checks by employers and will prevent any subdivision of government from putting in place something that will prevent employers from conducting those background checks.
- SB2797 establishes the "Mississippi Employment Fairness Act." It maintains that the state of Mississippi shall retain exclusive authority to require an employer to accept any provisions of a labor peace agreement or a project labor agreement.

Regarding issues of transparency, HB799 was adopted to ensure taxpayers were on a more level playing field with the Department of Revenue (DOR). Enactment of the measure will eliminate the requirement to pay the entire amount of delinquent taxes and will allow an appeal and call for DOR to send a notice of an adverse decision by certified mail prior to the appeal period commencing to run.

Members also voted to remove the Department of Education from authority of the State Personnel Board for two years providing the State Superintendent time to reorganize the agency. The Marine Resources Accountability and Reorganization Act was created to assess the Department of Marine Resources (DMR).