AN ACT TO AMEND SECTION 65-1-8, MISSISSIPPI CODE OF 1972, TO AUTHORIZE THE MISSISSIPPI TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION TO PURCHASE EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES LIABILITY INSURANCE; TO AMEND SECTION 71-3-38, MISSISSIPPI CODE OF 1972, TO AUTHORIZE THE MISSISSIPPI TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION TO PURCHASE AN EXCESS POLICY TO COVER CATASTROPHIC LOSSES INCURRED WHILE ACTING AS A WORKERS' COMPENSATION SELF-INSURER; AND FOR RELATED PURPOSES.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI:

SECTION 1. Section 65-1-8, Mississippi Code of 1972, is amended as follows:

65-1-8. (1) The Mississippi Transportation Commission shall have the following general powers, duties and responsibilities:

(a) To coordinate and develop a comprehensive, balanced transportation policy for the State of Mississippi;

(b) To promote the coordinated and efficient use of all available and future modes of transportation;

(c) To make recommendations to the Legislature regarding alterations or modifications in any existing transportation policies;

(d) To study means of encouraging travel and transportation of goods by the combination of motor vehicle and other modes of transportation;

(e) To take such actions as are necessary and proper to discharge its duties pursuant to the provisions of Laws, 1992, Chapter 496, and any other provision of law;

(f) To receive and provide for the expenditure of any funds made available to it by the Legislature, the federal government, or any other source.
(2) In addition to the general powers, duties and responsibilities listed in subsection (1) of this section, the Mississippi Transportation Commission shall have the following specific powers:

(a) To make rules and regulations whereby the transportation department shall change or relocate any and all highways herein or hereafter fixed as constituting a part of the state highway system, as may be deemed necessary or economical in the construction or maintenance thereof; to acquire by gift, purchase, condemnation, or otherwise, land or other property whatsoever that may be necessary for a state highway system as herein provided, with full consideration to be given to the stimulation of local public and private investment when acquiring such property in the vicinity of Mississippi towns, cities and population centers;

(b) To enforce by mandamus, or other proper legal remedies, all legal rights or rights of action of the Mississippi Transportation Commission with other public bodies, corporations or persons;

(c) To make and publish rules, regulations and ordinances for the control of and the policing of the traffic on the state highways, and to prevent their abuse by any or all persons, natural or artificial, by trucks, tractors, trailers or any other heavy or destructive vehicles or machines, or by any other means whatsoever, by establishing weights of loads or of vehicles, types of tires, width of tire surfaces, length and width of vehicles, with reasonable variations to meet approximate weather conditions, and all other proper police and protective regulations, and to provide ample means for the enforcement of same. The violation of any of the rules, regulations or ordinances so prescribed by the commission shall constitute a misdemeanor. No rule, regulation or ordinance shall be made that conflicts with any statute now in force or which may hereafter be
enacted, or with any ordinance of municipalities. A monthly
publication giving general information to the boards of
supervisors, employees and the public may be issued under such
rules and regulations as the commission may determine;

(d) To give suitable numbers to highways and to change
the number of any highway that shall become a part of the state
highway system. However, nothing herein shall authorize the
number of any highway to be changed so as to conflict with any
designation thereof as a U.S. numbered highway. Where, by a
specific act of the Legislature, the commission has been directed
to give a certain number to a highway, the commission shall not
have the authority to change such number;

(e) To make proper and reasonable rules, regulations,
and ordinances for the placing, erection, removal or relocation of
telephone, telegraph or other poles, signboards, fences, gas,
water, sewerage, oil or other pipelines, and other obstructions
that may, in the opinion of the commission, contribute to the
hazards upon any of the state highways, or in any way interfere
with the ordinary travel upon such highways, or the construction,
reconstruction or maintenance thereof, and to make reasonable
rules and regulations for the proper control thereof. Any
violation of such rules or regulations or noncompliance with such
ordinances shall constitute a misdemeanor.

Whenever the order of the commission shall require the
removal of, or other changes in the location of telephone,
telegraph, or other poles, signboards, gas, water, sewerage, oil
or other pipelines; or other similar obstructions on the
right-of-way or such other places where removal is required by
law, the owners thereof shall at their own expense move or change
the same to conform to the order of the commission. Any violation
of such rules or regulations or noncompliance with such orders
shall constitute a misdemeanor;
(f) To regulate and abandon grade crossings on any road fixed as a part of the state highway system, and whenever the commission, in order to avoid a grade crossing with the railroad, locates or constructs said road on one side of the railroad, the commission shall have the power to abandon and close such grade crossing, and whenever an underpass or overhead bridge is substituted for a grade crossing, the commission shall have power to abandon such grade crossing and any other crossing adjacent thereto. Included in the powers herein granted shall be the power to require the railroad at grade crossings, where any road of the state highway system crosses the same, to place signal posts with lights or other warning devices at such crossings at the expense of the railroad, and to regulate and abandon underpass or overhead bridges and, where abandoned because of the construction of a new underpass or overhead bridge, to close such old underpass or overhead bridge, or, in its discretion, to return the same to the jurisdiction of the county board of supervisors;

(g) To make proper and reasonable rules and regulations to control the cutting or opening of the road surfaces for subsurface installations;

(h) To make proper and reasonable rules and regulations for the removal from the public rights-of-way of any form of obstruction, to cooperate in improving their appearance, and to prescribe minimum clearance heights for seed conveyors, pipes, passageways or other structure of private or other ownership above the highways;

(i) To establish, and have the Transportation Department maintain and operate, and to cooperate with the state educational institutions in establishing, enlarging, maintaining and operating a laboratory or laboratories for testing materials and for other proper highway purposes;
(j) To provide, under the direction and with the approval of the Department of Finance and Administration, suitable offices, shops and barns in the City of Jackson;

(k) To establish and have enforced set-back regulations;

(l) To cooperate with proper state authorities in producing limerock for highway purposes and to purchase same at cost;

(m) To provide for the purchase of necessary equipment and vehicles and to provide for the repair and housing of same, to acquire by gift, purchase, condemnation or otherwise, land or lands and buildings in fee simple, and to authorize the Transportation Department to construct, lease or otherwise provide necessary and proper permanent district offices for the construction and maintenance divisions of the department, and for the repair and housing of the equipment and vehicles of the department; however, in each Supreme Court district only two (2) permanent district offices shall be set up, but a permanent status shall not be given to any such offices until so provided by act of the Legislature and in the meantime, all shops of the department shall be retained at their present location. As many local or subdistrict offices, shops or barns may be provided as is essential and proper to economical maintenance of the state highway system;

(n) To cooperate with the Department of Archives and History in having placed and maintained suitable historical markers, including those which have been approved and purchased by the State Historical Commission, along state highways, and to have constructed and maintained roadside driveways for convenience and safety in viewing them when necessary; however, no highway or bridge shall ever be memorialized to a man while living;

(o) To cooperate, in its discretion, with the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks in
planning and constructing roadside parks upon the right-of-way of state highways, whether constructed, under construction, or planned; said parks to utilize where practical barrow pits used in construction of state highways for use as fishing ponds. Said parks shall be named for abundant flora and fauna existing in the area or for the first flora or fauna found on the site;

(p) To, unless otherwise prohibited by law, * * * make such contracts and execute such instruments containing such reasonable and necessary appropriate terms, provisions and conditions as in its absolute discretion it may deem necessary, proper or advisable, for the purpose of obtaining or securing financial assistance, grants or loans from the United States of America or any department or agency thereof, including contracts with several counties of the state pertaining to the expenditure of such funds;

(q) To cooperate with the Federal Highway Administration in the matter of location, construction and maintenance of the Great River Road, to expend such funds paid to the commission by the Federal Highway Administration or other federal agency, and to authorize the Transportation Department to erect suitable signs marking this highway, the cost of such signs to be paid from state highway funds other than earmarked construction funds;

(r) To cooperate, in its discretion, with the Mississippi Forestry Commission and the School of Forestry, Mississippi State University, in a forestry management program, including planting, thinning, cutting and selling, upon the right-of-way of any highway, constructed, acquired or maintained by the Transportation Department, and to sell and dispose of any and all growing timber standing, lying or being on any right-of-way acquired by the commission for highway purposes in the future; such sale or sales to be made in accordance with the
sale of personal property which has become unnecessary for public
use as provided for in Section 65-1-123, Mississippi Code of 1972;

(s) To expend funds in cooperation with the Division of
Plant Industry, Mississippi Department of Agriculture and
Commerce, the United States government or any department or agency
thereof, or with any department or agency of this state, to
control, suppress or eradicate serious insect pests, rodents,
plant parasites and plant diseases on the state highway
rights-of-way;

(t) To provide for the placement, erection and
maintenance of motorist services business signs and supports
within state highway rights-of-way in accordance with current
state and federal laws and regulations governing the placement of
traffic control devices on state highways, and to establish and
collect reasonable fees from the businesses having information on
such signs;

(u) To request and to accept the use of persons
convicted of an offense, whether a felony or a misdemeanor, for
work on any road construction, repair or other project of the
Transportation Department. The commission is also authorized to
request and to accept the use of persons who have not been
convicted of an offense but who are required to fulfill certain
court-imposed conditions pursuant to Section 41-29-150(d)(1) or
99-15-26, Mississippi Code of 1972, or the Pretrial Intervention
of 1972. The commission is authorized to enter into any
agreements with the Department of Corrections, the State Parole
Board, any criminal court of this state, and any other proper
official regarding the working, guarding, safekeeping, clothing
and subsistence of such persons performing work for the
Transportation Department. Such persons shall not be deemed
agents, employees or involuntary servants of the Transportation
Department while performing such work or while going to and from
work or other specified areas;

(v) To provide for the administration of the railroad
revitalization program pursuant to Section 57-43-1 et seq.;

(w) * * * To, in its discretion, * * * expend funds for
the purchase of service pins for employees of the Mississippi
Transportation Department;

(x) To cooperate with the State Tax Commission by
providing for weight enforcement field personnel to collect and
assess taxes, fees and penalties and to perform all duties as
required pursuant to Section 27-55-501 et seq., Sections 27-19-1
et seq., 27-55-1 et seq., 27-59-1 et seq. and 27-61-1 et seq.,
Mississippi Code of 1972, with regard to vehicles subject to the
jurisdiction of the Office of Weight Enforcement. All collections
and assessments shall be transferred daily to the State Tax
Commission;

(y) * * * To delegate the authority to enter into a
supplemental agreement to a contract previously approved by the
commission if the supplemental agreement involves an additional
expenditure not to exceed One Hundred Thousand Dollars
($100,000.00);

(z) (i) * * * To, in its discretion, * * * enter into
agreements with any county, municipality, county transportation
commission, business, corporation, partnership, association,
individual or other legal entity, for the purpose of accelerating
the completion date of scheduled highway construction projects.

(ii) Such an agreement may permit the cost of a
highway construction project to be advanced to the commission by a
county, municipality, county transportation commission, business,
corporation, partnership, association, individual or other legal
entity, and repaid to such entity by the commission when highway
construction funds become available; provided, however, that
repayment of funds advanced to the Mississippi Transportation
Commission shall be made no sooner than the commission's identified projected revenue schedule for funding of that particular construction project, and no other scheduled highway construction project established by statute or by the commission may be delayed by an advanced funding project authorized under this paragraph (z). Repayments to an entity that advances funds to the Mississippi Transportation Commission under this paragraph (z) may not include interest or other fees or charges, and the total amount repaid shall not exceed the total amount of funds advanced to the commission by the entity.

(iii) In considering whether to enter into such an agreement, the commission shall consider the availability of financial resources, the effect of such agreement on other ongoing highway construction, the urgency of the public's need for swift completion of the project and any other relevant factors.

(iv) Such an agreement shall be executed only upon a finding by the commission, spread upon its minutes, that the acceleration of the scheduled project is both feasible and beneficial. The commission shall also spread upon its minutes its findings with regard to the factors required to be considered pursuant to item (iii) of this paragraph (z).

(aa) To, in its discretion, obtain and pay for employment practices liability insurance. Such policy shall be purchased from companies authorized to do business in this state. The amount of the deductibles under such a policy shall be in such an amount as may be considered reasonable and prudent by the commission. The commission may pay for the costs of such policy out of any available funds in the State Highway Fund. The purchase of insurance under this paragraph (aa) shall not constitute a waiver of sovereign immunity or any protection afforded the commission or the department under Sections 11-46-1 through 11-46-23.
SECTION 2. Section 71-3-38, Mississippi Code of 1972, is amended as follows:

71-3-38. (1) While acting as a self-insurer as authorized by Section 71-3-5, the Mississippi Transportation Commission is authorized and empowered to establish and maintain, from funds made available upon requisition from the State Treasury, a special workers' compensation account, and to deposit such funds therein, and to pay therefrom the workers' compensation benefits as authorized by Section 71-3-37, and to pay such awards as may be entered and such other costs, expenses and benefits as may be incidental to the settlement of such workers' compensation claims. Disbursement from such special account shall be by check properly drawn against such account and signed by such personnel as may be duly authorized by the Mississippi Transportation Commission.

Payment from the special account shall be deemed payments of and from the State of Mississippi.

(2) The Mississippi Transportation Commission is authorized and empowered, in its discretion, to obtain and pay for an excess policy to cover catastrophic losses incurred while acting as a self-insurer as authorized by Section 71-3-5. Such policy shall be purchased from companies authorized to do business in this state. The amount of the deductibles under such a policy shall be in such an amount as may be considered reasonable and prudent by the Mississippi Transportation Commission. The Mississippi Transportation Commission may pay for the costs of such policy out of any available funds in the State Highway Fund.

SECTION 3. This act shall take effect and be in force from and after July 1, 2002.