UM unveils 'Transformative Partnership' with three communities

Ceremonies in Charleston, New Albany and Lexington kick off M Partner program

By Michael Newsom

M Partner, the transformative initiative outlined in the University of Mississippi's comprehensive strategic plan, Flagship Forward, was launched last week through signing ceremonies with pilot partners in three Mississippi cities: Charleston, New Albany and Lexington.

Chancellor Jeffrey Vitter and the mayors of those towns announced the partnerships Monday and Tuesday, March 19 and March 20, at public launch events in those communities.

M Partner is the fruit of a meeting of leaders from all UM campuses that was designed to create an ambitious new approach to the university's longstanding commitment to addressing needs in the state.

"We challenged ourselves to come up with a 'big, bold idea,' a new approach to making a difference here in Mississippi," Vitter said. "And we realized that the opportunity is to tap into the talents of our entire university, partner with a community and make a difference across a broad range of areas in that community – from health, entrepreneurship, education and economic development to transportation, media, marketing and more."

The chancellor laid out the vision for the program in his November 2016 inaugural address, noting the considerable potential in channeling the talents of the university to support towns and cities as they work together to improve community life. This innovative program seeks to match diverse and comprehensive university talent and ideas with community goals to create leveraged results.

The goal is to create a mutually beneficial relationship through which the university and the community work together to co-create knowledge and ideas that improve quality of life in the long term. M Partner employs a three-pronged approach to community partnership:

• A robust student service-learning component in which students and professors work alongside community members to achieve meaningful results in the community and enhance learning and teaching at the university.

• Research and scholarship fueled by real-world challenges and informed by lessons learned from partners at the community level.

• Engagement of university and community leaders to apply best practices and creative problem-solving that will enhance community life and inform university outreach and service activities.

The chancellor signed agreements with New Albany Mayor Tim Kent and Charleston Mayor Sedrick Smith on Monday, and one with Lexington Mayor Robin McCrory on Tuesday to launch M Partner.

In those cities, M Partner will act as a pilot program for up to 24 months. During that time, communities will work with the university to define their needs and the two entities will collaborate on strategies to address issues ranging from health care and education, economic development and policy, marketing and tourism, and resiliency to core government systems.

"Over the coming months, you'll begin to hear many more details about what M Partner will entail," Vitter said. "But at its core, it is about working together for a stronger Mississippi, collaborating with local leaders to address community priorities while enhancing student learning and research and addressing our university's fundamental responsibility to help build a healthy and vibrant Mississippi."

New Albany has a thriving downtown and a strong tax base, but community leaders said they will look to the expertise of Ole Miss students, faculty and staff to identify ways for the city to grow and improve. Officials said they're also eager to hear from their citizenry.

"The city of New Albany is excited to see where this collaboration with the University of Mississippi takes us," Kent said. "This relationship will lend itself to our community in a way that gives us the ability to imagine and generate new ideas and achieve great collective goals for the common good and general interest of our citizens."

M Partner promises to be a great program for the people of New Albany, said U.S. Rep. Trent Kelly, congressman for Mississippi's first district.

"I commend the University of Mississippi and Chancellor Vitter for their forward-thinking initiative that created M Partner," Kelly said. "Through this public-private partnership, Mississippi is leading the efforts to capitalize on the community's strengths, to recognize and address its challenges, and to create meaningful opportunities for the future."

Smith said Charleston is eager to get started with the program's community assessment to determine which projects to undertake and how to execute them. Following Monday's announcement, city leaders held a meeting with citizens to hear their ideas.

"I'm both honored and proud to share in the opportunities for how we can work together to invest in Charleston and provide every citizen with the resources necessary for a brighter future," Smith said.

McCrory said M Partner's goals for the work in Lexington, which will be determined through meetings with the university and community members, will leave an impression on her city for generations to come.

"M Partner is the collaborative hope we have in striving to do this in a community with such limited resources and budgetary restraints," McCrory said. "The University of Mississippi will leave footprints of progress throughout the city of Lexington for years to come through the successful projects our community will have the privilege of working on together as a result of being an inaugural M Partner city."

U.S. Rep. Bennie Thompson, who represents the state's second district, said he is pleased that Charleston and Lexington were selected for the program.

"A collaborative approach to community development and engagement is a great way to strengthen these communities and build resources that will be very useful today and in the future," he said. "I appreciate the University of Mississippi's strong commitment to our state and these cities."

Katrina Caldwell, UM vice chancellor for diversity and community engagement, will guide the program.

Research has clearly shown that it takes teams made up of those from different backgrounds to solve complicated problems, Caldwell said. When she spoke at Lexington, she characterized M Partner as an "all hands-on deck" situation where everyone brings his or her best ideas to the table.

(Continued on page 6.)

Unemployment rate falls in state, up in county

Staff Reports

Mississippi's unemployment rate fell in February 2018 to 4.5%, which is the lowest level of unemployment ever recorded in Mississippi.

The February rate is one-tenth of a percentage point lower than a month earlier in January 2018 and nine-tenths of a percentage point lower than a year ago in February 2017, when the rate was 5.4%.

The number of non-farm jobs in Mississippi rose by 2,500 in February to 1,163,700, which are the most jobs ever recorded in Mississippi.

Holmes County's jobless rate has risen from earlier numbers reported in the *Herald* in January, to 9.5%, up from 8.1 in November 2017.

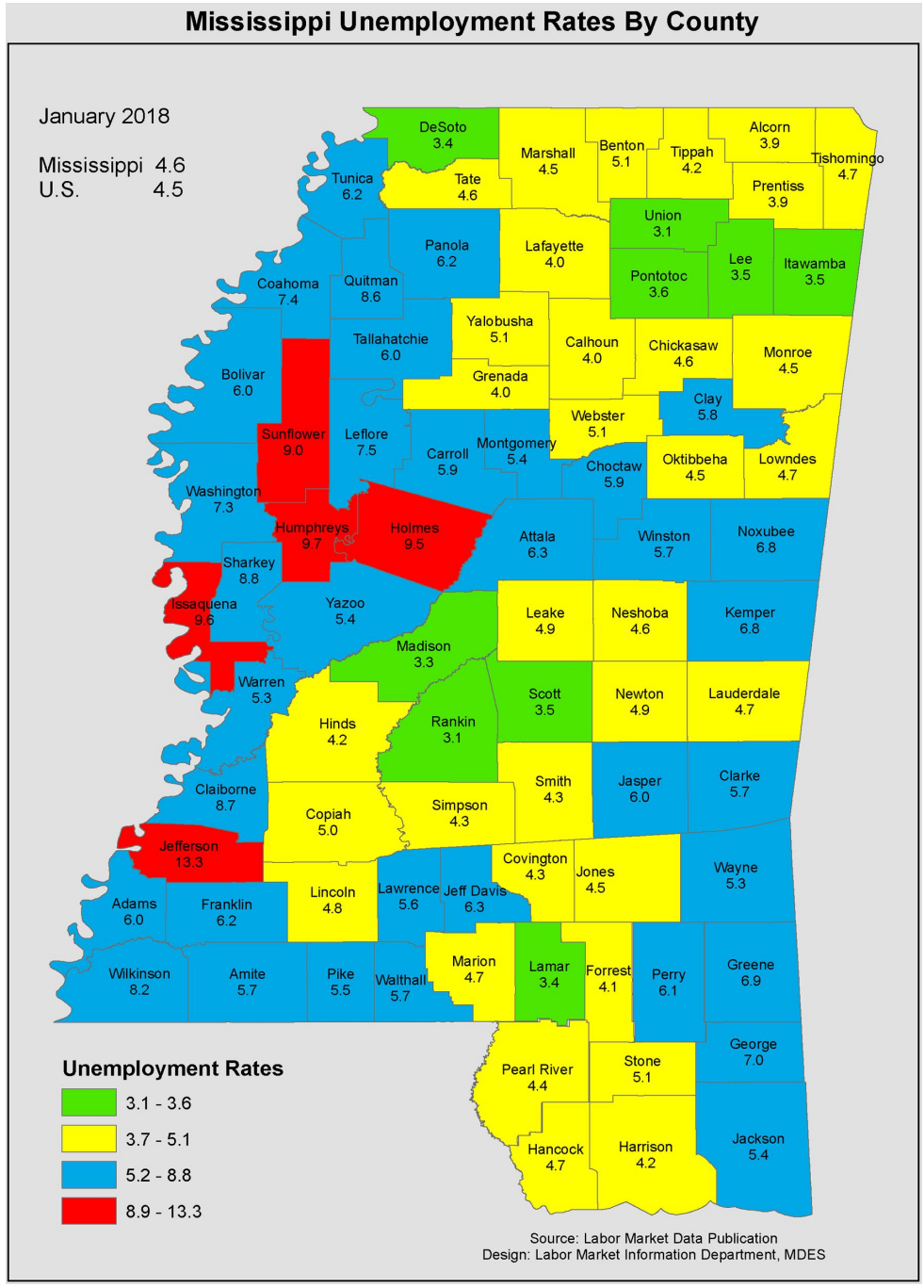
Over the year since February 2017, the number of jobs in our state increased by 14,300. These numbers are based on a survey of employers. That employer survey is recognized as the most reliable indicator of job growth.

The Labor Force, which is made up of everyone who has a job or is looking for a job, decreased in February by 700 to 1,274,100. Over the year since February 2017, the Labor Force fell by 8,500.

The number of people working in Mississippi fell in February by 100 to 1,216,400. For the year since February 2017, employment in our state increased by 2,800.

The number of unemployed Mississippians fell by 600 in February to 57,700, which is the lowest number of Mississippians without jobs since July 1979.

Over the year since February 2017, the number of unemployed Mississippians decreased by 11,300.



Saint Paul Church of God in Christ and Elder William Dean, Jr., Pastor, honored their scholars in grades K-12 on Sunday, March 11 at the 11:00 a.m. regular church service. Fifteen students were meritorious and received honor certificates and monetary awards named for Superintendent (S), Principal (P) and Honor Roll (H). Pictured from left to right, first row, are: Ashton Jaquan Friend (S), Jakara Semaj Bankhead (H), William Terell Dean (H), Seleah Coleman (S), Yoni Ojorie Farley (S) and Titus Da'Monja Du'Pree Deering (S); second row, Rayla Thompson (P), Darnell Deering (H), Samantha Deering (S), Kaylan Kendarius Powell (S) and Bennie Kendrick Powell (S); and third row, Elnora Johnson Patton, Kendrick Markel Powell (P) and Elder William Dean, Jr. Not pictured are: Jinaya Lanae Ford (P), Alvin Marquis Grayer, Jr. (P) and Paris Samone Grayer (H).

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