

# Session ends with many accomplishments

By Speaker of the House Phillip Gunn

The 2019 Legislative Session has now ended, and I would contend it was a very good one. The Legislature made many significant policy decisions that will improve the lives of Mississippians, but I will only mention a few.



I'll start with the budget. Over the previous seven years, we have had to make many conservative decisions regarding the budget and the expenditure of your taxpayer money. Some of those decisions have been tough. Sometimes we have had to make cuts. However, we have always pledged to live within our means and not spend more money than we have to spend. We have worked very hard to not raise your taxes but to be good stewards of the money you have given us. This year, I believe we were able to reap the benefits of the sound budget practices we have implemented over the last seven years.

This year, the Legislature adopted over a \$6.3 billion budget. We invested \$58 million in our teachers and teacher assistants. This is roughly a \$1,500 pay raise for each teacher. We also gave raises to our IHL and Community College teachers, and we gave a pay raise to state employees. We level funded state agencies and honored the two percent set-aside. We also shored up the Public Employee Retirement System (PERS) by investing an additional \$66 million in the system. This, too, is a direct financial benefit to our teachers and state employees.

Aside from the budget, we were able to pass many significant policy initiatives. During the first week of Session, we passed the Mississippi Broadband Enabling Act. This will allow the electric power cooperatives of Mississippi to evaluate whether or not it is feasible for them to provide broadband services to the rural

areas. They may or may not be able to make it work, but the legislature has done its part to open the door for that to happen. This should be a great service to our citizens who live in remote areas.

My personal highlight for this session was the passage of the human trafficking bill. Two years ago, I attended a meeting about this issue. My eyes were opened to just how prevalent this is, not only in the nation, but in Mississippi. I decided this has to stop. I hosted a summit last fall and brought in national experts to discuss the issue. Arising from that summit, we worked with these experts to craft legislation to make Mississippi a leader in stopping human trafficking. The bill provides protection to children under the age of 18 from being charged with prostitution. Research has shown that victims are more likely to come forward if they know they will not be charged with a crime. We

also determined a need for training for those who are most likely to come in contact with children who are being trafficked. Furthermore, enactment of this legislation allows law enforcement to take a child into emergency protective custody for purposes of referring them to specialized services. This bill will have a direct, immediate impact on saving young lives.

Moving forward, we will be focusing more attention to the recovery and rescue of a child. I will call on faith-based groups to engage in this. Hopefully, we can one day live in a state where this doesn't exist anymore.

Finally, the passage of the heartbeat bill is another victory for those who believe in the sanctity of human life and the protection for the unborn. This bill says that once a heartbeat is detected, no abortion can be performed. This issue is not controversial for me. The majority of the legislature and the citizens of our state believe life begins at conception. This legislature has worked hard to make that statement, and we will do whatever it takes to protect the lives of the unborn.

I look forward to continuing to serve as your representative.



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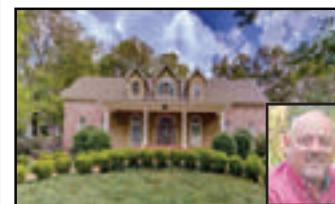
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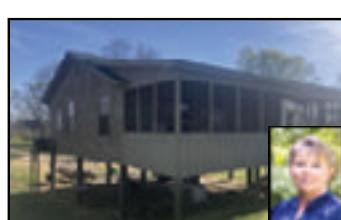
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