



Southern Echo, Inc.

The 2020 sessions of the Mississippi Legislature began at noon on January 7, 2020. The Legislature will end its 118-day session on Sunday, May 3, 2020 sine die. Below, we have highlighted ‘Hot Topics’ that have developed during the first two months of the session. As part of the Southern Echo tradition, in upcoming legislative updates we will share with you our analysis of bills as the session unfolds.

2019 ELECTION RECAP

Governor

Tate Reeves, Republican

Lieutenant Governor

Delbert Hosemann, Republican

Attorney General

Lynn Finch, Republican

Agricultural Commissioner

Andy Gipson, Republican

Secretary of State

Michael Watson, Republican

Treasurer

David McRae, Republican

Insurance Commissioner

Mike Chaney, Republican

Public Service Commissioner

Brent Bailey (Central), Republican

Transportation Commissioner

Willie Simmons, Democrat



Southern Echo, Dogwood Alliance and the Gulf South Coalition Collaborate to Protect Communities from the Hazards of Wood Pellet Plants

Joining the Southern Region of Mississippi in

late 2019, a renewable energy company, Enviva, has gained notoriety amongst locals and environmental enthusiasts. Having gained the support of former Governor, Phil Bryant, the



company entered George County, MS through its development of a wood pellet plant. Boasting jobs and a direct correlation with the local tree market, John Keppler, Enviva's CEO, indicated that the forestry industry within the town of Lucedale, MS proved to be ideal for the location of this plant. However, the plant has received notable negative concerns due to the prospects of damaging environmental elements that could arise upon the operation of this factory which include concerns such as the release of asthma-inducing microscopic particles and the reduction of trees in the immediate area¹. Environmental groups such as Clean Air Carolina and Division of Air Quality within Carolina have previously held concerns with Enviva operating wood pellet plants due to the emissions that could impact the quality of air within the surrounding community. Thus, an immediate concern for several Lucedale, MS citizens is how to protect their natural resources, their tree industry, and air quality in the presence of this Maryland-based company².

Restorative Justice Reform Updates

The access to voting rights for formerly incarcerated felons within the state of Mississippi has served as a talking point over the last few years. Through cases such as *Dennis Hopkins, et al v. Secretary of State*

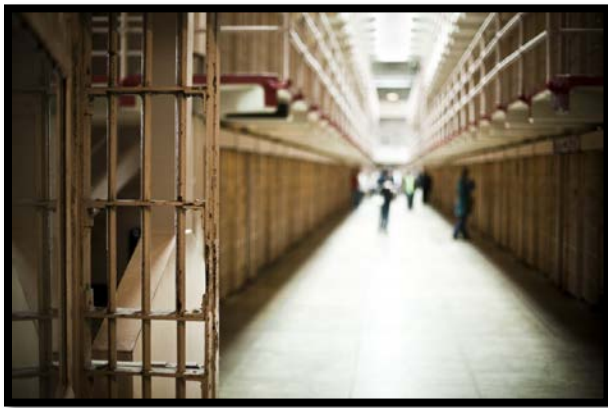


¹ Heglar, M. A. (2019, May 9). Mississippi deserves better than Enviva's wood pellet mill. Retrieved from <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/opinion/columnists/2019/05/09/mississippi-deserves-better-than-envivas-wood-pellet-mill/1153760001/>

² Perez, M. (2019, May 16). One of the world's largest pellet plants planned in Lucedale. Residents, environmental activists at odds. Retrieved from <https://www.sunherald.com/news/local/counties/george-county/article230375599.html>



Delbert Hosemann, which was filed in March of 2018, Mississippians have grown to understand the extent to which formerly incarcerated persons have been denied their access to vote. Currently, there exists a lifetime voting ban for anyone who has been convicted of certain crimes. Through this ban which is instilled in the Constitution of the State of Mississippi, over 50,000 Mississippians have been banned from voting in local and federal elections³. The case of *Dennis Hopkins* argues that this ban proves to be cruel and unusual punishment, and a violation of the 8th Amendment⁴. Likewise, the plaintiff in this case hopes to not only provide formerly incarcerated inmates access to local and federal government but also assist in the re-entry of formerly incarcerated persons back into society.



The Case for Regional Jails

Senate Bill 2684 has been introduced in hopes to provide authority to the Governor and Commissioner of Corrections to increase the number of persons who can be housed in regional correctional facilities. Through this bill, the Department of Corrections is able to contract with the board of supervisors of one or more counties and with regional facilities operated by one or more counties. These contracts can be established to provide for housing, care, and control of offenders. Each contract **may** provide that the Department

³ Dennis Hopkins, et al. v. Secretary of State Delbert Hosemann. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.splcenter.org/seeking-justice/case-docket/dennis-hopkins-et-al-v-secretary-state-delbert-hosemann>

⁴ Santana, R. (2019, December 3). Mississippi felons push court to restore voting rights. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/b34a318e6e594ea586756d82ce7c718d>



of Corrections pay a fee of up to \$31.00 per day for each offender who is housed in these regional facilities.

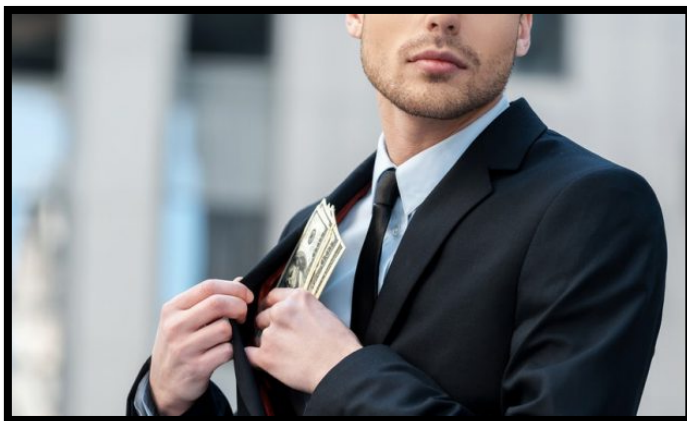
Teachers' Salaries

Mississippi lawmakers are looking to prompt a raise in the salaries of teachers in the state by at least \$1,000.

Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann has indicated that he hopes



this increase in teacher pay will prompt a nationwide increase in the lowest salaries within the country⁵. Through the proposed Senate Bill 2001, most Mississippi teachers would receive a \$1,000 raise. As of February 19, 2020, the bill has passed in the Senate and has been referred to the Education and Appropriations Committee of the House⁶.



TANF Scandal

In early February 2020, ranking members of various state and local entities were arrested due to the largest public embezzlement scheme in the history of the State of Mississippi.

⁵ Mississippi Teacher Pay Raise Proposal is Moving Forward. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2020/jan/30/mississippi-teacher-pay-raise-proposal-moving-forw/>

⁶ Mississippi SB2001: 2020: Regular Session. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://legiscan.com/MS/bill/SB2001/2020>



John Davis, the former Director of the Mississippi Department of Human Services (DHS); former DHS employee Latimer Smith; Dr. Nancy New, owner and director of the Mississippi Community Education Center (MCEC) and New Learning, Inc.; Zach New, Assistant Executive Director of MCEC; Anne McGrew, accountant for MCEC; and Brett DiBiase were arrested in connection to a multimillion-dollar embezzlement scheme. Behaviors of embezzlement included the enrichment of DiBiase through TANF funds, rehabilitation services, and payments for personal investments⁷. Currently the financial extent of fraudulent usage of taxpayer money is unknown. Yet, each individual has been indicted for their participation in this scheme. The currently known amount of money that was embezzled by each person is as follows:

- John Davis, the former Director of the Mississippi Department of Human Services (DHS): unknown at this time
- Latimer Smith, Former DHS employee: unknown at this time
- Dr. Nancy New, owner and Director of the Mississippi Community Education Center and New Learning, Inc.:
 - September 20, 2018: Conspired to move more than \$2 million in MCEC funds to the News' personal accounts
 - October 7, 2019: Transferred a total of \$2.15 million to two Florida medical technology companies, with the assistance of Zach New
- Zach New, Assistant Executive Director of MCEC:

⁷ John Davis, Nancy New and Others Arrested in Massive Embezzlement Scheme. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2020/feb/05/john-davis-nancy-new-and-others-arrested-massive-e/>



- September 20, 2018: Conspired to move more than \$2 million in MCEC funds to the News' personal accounts
- January 18, 2019: Illegal transfer of \$750,000 of MCEC funds
- October 7, 2019: Transferred a total of \$2.15 million to two Florida medical technology companies, with the assistance of Dr. Nancy New
- Anne McGrew, accountant for MCEC:
 - September 20, 2018: Conspired to move more than \$2 million in MCEC funds to the News' personal accounts
- Brett DiBiase:
 - December 12, 2018: DiBiase signs a \$48,000 contract with MDHS to "educate MDHS staff and partners in identifying opioid abuse" through 24 training sessions. These sessions never took place.

As you can see there are multiple issues that need careful stewardship during this legislative session. We will continue to monitor these issues and seek stakeholder participation in insuring that the voices of the community are heard. Stay tuned for further updates and calls to action on these issues and more throughout the session.



Important Notes:

March 3rd was the deadline for Committees to report general bills and constitutional amendments.

Resources:

[Legislative Deadlines](#)

[House Calendar](#)

[Senate Calendar](#)

[Contact Your Legislator](#)

[House Committee List](#)

[Senate Committee List](#)

March 2020