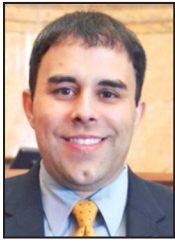


Legislative Update: 2020 was an unusual legislative session



By Guest Columnist
Mississippi
Representative
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Special to
Pelahatchie News

This has been a very unusual Legislative session, for sure, but I am glad to report we were able to take care of budgetary matters along with other important items before the end of the fiscal year on June 30. We passed HCR 69, which extends the session and will allow us to come back to the Capitol to attend to COVID-19 related legislation as it becomes necessary. We anticipate returning in October.

Much of the regular business had been finalized prior to the most recent meeting, so we were reviewing a lot of conference reports. These are measures that have been passed by both the House and the Senate in different versions, with those differences ironed out in conference committees. Our budget took around a 3-5% cut across the board on all agencies due to the impact of the coronavirus to our state economy.

We have been very concerned about how public schools will re-open in the midst of a pandemic which seems to be getting worse rather than better. We dedicated a good portion of the CARES fund-

ing to public schools, in addition to providing other monies to expand broadband services to rural areas (HB 1797). This is necessary because school children will likely be required to take at least some of their classes online during the pandemic, and we all need better Internet access.

We also passed SB 2511, which provides an easier route for teachers to be certified. This should help address the intense shortage of teachers in Mississippi at the current time. From and after July 1, a teacher candidate can apply for their license with an ACT score of twenty-one, or the SAT equivalent. They must also receive a qualifying passing score on the Praxis Core Academic Skills for Educators exam. The applicant must also have a minimum GPA of 3.0 on coursework prior to admission.

CARES ACT funds were hot topics of discussion as we all worked to try to make the best use of this help from the federal government. We made sure that all bidding/awarding processes will be conducted openly and accountably. We've all seen what happens when public contracts are awarded with little oversight or transparency.

Here are some of the appropriations from the CARES ACT to help with reimbursement from cost related to the coronavirus:

- Small business grant program: \$300

million

- Governor's discretionary fund: \$50 million
- Broadband access: \$75 million
- Health care: \$129.7 million. This includes \$80 million for hospitals, and nearly \$50 million for other health providers and nonprofits, including food pantries.
- Mississippi Emergency Management Agency: \$40 million
- Cities and counties: \$70 million
- Corrections: \$20 million
- Tourism: \$15 million
- K-12 Distance learning: \$150 million
- K-12 Internet connectivity: \$50 million
- Universities: \$50 million
- Community colleges: \$50 million
- Workforce development: \$55 million
- Elections: \$1 million
- Courts and judiciary: \$2.5 million
- Unemployment trust fund: \$181.8 million

I am proud to say we strengthened the law against animal cruelty on domesticated animals to include felony offenses.

There will be several different constitutional amendments on the ballot this November when we go to the polls for the presidential election.

We passed a constitutional amendment proposal to do away with the archaic

"Electoral College," which allows the House to determine the winner of state-wide offices if no one received a majority popular vote.

The people will vote on that amendment as well as a Medical Marijuana measure that will be on the ballot on November 3.

On Wednesday, July 1, a ceremony was held to retire the 1894 state flag, after legislators earlier voted to remove it and created a commission to consider replacement designs. The commission will pick a design that must have "In God We Trust" on it. If the people do not approve the design by a majority vote on November 3, the Commission will go "back to the drawing board" for another design, and the State will not have a flag until a majority has approved one.

As you may know, a number of my fellow Representatives have tested positive for COVID-19, including the Speaker. All House and Senate members were being tested for COVID-19 this week. Please join me in praying for their healing and the safety of their families and all who work at our State Capitol.

Please remember to wear a mask and social distance when out in public. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to serve as your Representative at the State Capitol. Please feel free to reach out to me anytime or email at tmiles@house.ms.gov.



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