

How Mississippians Can Get Involved

Although the Legislature and Governor make spending decisions, residents also have an important role in the budget process. Residents have the responsibility to ensure that the state budget meets the combined needs and reflects the collective values of all the state's people. There are many ways to track and influence the budget-making process:

Step #1—Keep Current

The most direct way to be involved is to know what is going on. A great first step is watching the news and reading the newspaper. In addition to the stories that run on the front page and in local sections, the Sunday paper often includes editorials that comment on tax and budget issues.

Step # 2—Enhance Your Knowledge

If a newspaper article or TV news story piques your interest, there are several good sources for additional information:

- ☉ The Center for Policy Research and Planning at the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning publishes the *Annual Tax Expenditure Report* (available online),³³ which includes information on how much the state spends on corporate tax credits. The Center also produces a publication called the *Mississippi Economic Outlook and Review*.
- ☉ The Legislative Budget Office publishes several documents on their website (www.lbo.ms.gov), including the Joint Legislative Budget Recommendation, the Legislative Appropriations Bulletin and Monthly State General Revenue Reports.
- ☉ Likewise, the Mississippi Economic Policy Center (MEPC) conducts budget and tax analyses and posts them online at www.mepconline.org. You can sign up for e-mail updates on the MEPC website as well.

Step #3—Engage Others

The easiest way to get involved is to contact an organization that is already working on an issue that you find interesting. Many nonprofit organizations have an understanding of the budget process and can tell you how to get involved. This can be in any form—from writing a letter to a legislator to having a face-to-face meeting with a government official.

Nonprofit advocacy organizations can also help keep you updated on key people and events influencing the legislative process. For example, nonprofit organizations often know which legislators are important to contact on issues you care about. The organizations can also alert you about special hearings or provide summaries of the hearings if you are unable to attend.

Looking Ahead

We hope that Mississippi's budget and tax systems have become a little less overwhelming to you after reading this text. Budget decisions directly influence the quality of education that our children receive, the condition of the roads that we travel, the safety of our communities and the level of trust we can place in professionals such as doctors, dentists, pharmacists and nurses. All of these services—education, road maintenance and public health and safety—have a price tag and must be paid for through taxes or fees.

Strong fiscal systems are needed to ensure that the funds are available—in a good economy or in a slow economy—to cover the costs of the services that Mississippi residents depend on everyday. It is important to know how the system works to ensure that it works efficiently, effectively and equitably.