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Clarion Ledger

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Greenhouse Manager Greggeisha Blackmon holds a society garlic plant, which is drought tolerant, at Hutto's Home and Garden Center in Jackson on March 26.

Special session likely averted

MS lawmakers decide bulk of budget

Bea Anhuaci
Mississippi Clarion Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

Legislators are on track to pass the state budget before the April 4 end of the session this year, likely avoiding a repeat of last year's expensive special session.

In a Sunday afternoon, March 29, meeting both chambers passed dozens of appropriations bills that outline how much money the state plans to spend in the coming year. The tentative budget that lawmakers have put forward totals just over \$7.36 billion, around a 3% increase from last year.

What's in the budget?

Legislators have rubber-stamped allotments for dozens of state agencies and programs, including the state health, environmental quality and corrections departments. They also, after extensive discussions about teacher pay raises, approved the funding for the education department that will disburse pay bumps to teachers, assistant teachers and school resource officers.

The K-12 education budget is among the largest spend that the state will make next year, coming in at \$3.45 billion. That is just over \$120 million more than the previous appropriation, or a roughly 3% increase.

The state's Medicaid payment will also top \$1 billion this year, climbing up 16% from its total last year. After the more than \$4.6 billion that the state is set to spend on education and Medicaid, said Sen. Briggs Hopson, R-Vicksburg, there wasn't room for much else in the budget.

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DEALING WITH DROUGHT

Mississippi is in the middle of a dry spell. Here's how to choose plants, water them

Brian Broom
Mississippi Clarion Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

Spring is here and the Mississippi landscape is turning green, so many may not realize the state is in a drought. It's also the time when people are sprucing up their yards with new plants and a drought can make that a challenge.

So, here's what you need to know about the drought and tips on combatting it in your yard.

Even with the possibility of rain, Jackson's cumulative rainfall total is unseasonably low this time of year.

"We are, at least here in Jackson, since January 1 we've had 9.06 inches of

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Lantana plants, seen at Hutto's Home and Garden Center in Jackson on March 26, are drought tolerant.

PHOTOS BY LAUREN WITTE/CLARION LEDGER

Mississippians ask for voting rights back

Bea Anhuaci
Mississippi Clarion Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

At the end of this year, Gladys Scott will have spent as much time out of prison as she spent in custody.

Scott was convicted in 1994 of armed robbery alongside her sister Jamie and released on parole in 2010. The pair were initially given two life sentences for their role in the crime, which netted them \$11.

In 1994, advocates for criminal justice reform argued that the punishment was an egregious injustice. More than 30 years later, advocates for voting rights restoration say that the injustice con-

tinues, this time at the ballot box.

Armed robbery is one of 23 disenfranchising crimes in Mississippi, meaning the crimes that strip voting rights from those convicted of them. In general, formerly incarcerated people can apply to regain the right to vote five years after they complete all of the suffrage requirements, including paying restitution and completing their probation.

Although she has been out of prison for well over five years, Scott's release came with lifetime probation. She is eligible to vote in Florida, where she now lives, but barring a pardon from the

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Gladys Scott speaks during a One Voice direct action day meeting at the Mississippi State Capitol in Jackson on March 26.

AYRTON BRECKENRIDGE/CLARION LEDGER

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