

MS lawmakers want taxpayer money for tourist rail, hotel renovations

By [Steve Wilson](#)

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It sounds like a movie advertisement straight from the Legislature, a surefire blockbuster guaranteed to waste tax dollars.

[State Rep. Bobby Moak, D-Bogue Chitto](#), wants state taxpayers to fund a \$1.5 million bond issue to start a tourist rail line from Natchez to Brookhaven, using existing tracks.

This is, of course, the same Legislature that brought you \$155 million in sales [tax incentives](#) for “cultural retail” attractions, that gave several million dollars to a museum to honor legendary country singer Tammy Wynette.

It’s the same group that brought you the Grammy Museum Mississippi — along with federal money.

Moak’s [bill](#), House Bill 50, was submitted on the first day of the session and would fund the purchase of passenger rail cars to carry tourists 66 miles through Adams, Franklin and Lincoln counties. Moak’s district is in the eastern terminus, in Lincoln County.

He submitted the bill during last year’s session, but it died in committee.

It wouldn’t be the first time the state worked on the railroad. It gave a coalition of seven north Mississippi counties — known as the North Central Mississippi Regional Railroad Authority — \$30 million to buy the Grenada Railway and prevent scrapping it. The authority was supposed to rent the line to a new operator.

The railway purchase was just a small part of \$230 million the state spent on bond issues in [HB 787](#) and [Senate Bill 2975](#) in last year’s session.

Under HB15, submitted by [State Rep. Charles Young Jr., D-Meridian](#), hotels could get incentives to renovate.

But that’s not all folks. A Legislative “Entertainment study committee” met before Christmas to look at a possible subsidy for recording studios to relocate to Mississippi. While a bill hasn’t emerged, the session still has more than three months to go.

[Nicole Kaeding](#), a budget analyst for the Cato Institute who focuses on federal and state spending, says such projects aren't the best ways to stimulate economic growth. Creating a better regulatory and tax environment for all businesses should be the goal.

“Politicians are quick to waste taxpayer dollars on lavish new projects,” Kaeding told Mississippi Watchdog. “They promise economic development that will bring economic growth, higher wages and more jobs, but the empirical evidence is thin. Government funding of projects is not a panacea.

“Every dollar spent by the government must come from somewhere, normally through higher taxes or more debt. Instead, politicians should focus their efforts on creating the right environment for businesses to thrive.”

The movie industry, which receives generous incentives to film in the state, is dominated by sequels and “tent pole” franchise films. We guess the Legislature, in its desire to become part of the investment class with other people's money, is rolling down that same track.

No pun intended.