



Elvis Presley's birthplace, Jackson Zoo could get more state money

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Learning their money might go to a pair of tourist attractions might leave Mississippi taxpayers "All Shook Up."

The Jackson Zoo and the Elvis Presley Birthplace Museum in Tupelo could get \$1 million apiece if a pair of bond bills pass the state Legislature.

House Bill 1458 would provide the funding for the zoo; HB 1568 would help fund the museum. "Increasing Mississippi's state debt in order to fund a museum and a zoo is silly," said Nicole Kaeding, a budget analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute who focuses on federal and state spending policy. "Taxpayers deserve better financial management than this. The state should not be subsidizing these entities, instead they should rely upon other funding methods like the sale of admission tickets."

Dick Guyton, executive director of the birthplace and the museum, said the money would be used to rehabilitate a small lake in the surrounding 15-acre park. In addition to the museum, the site includes the home where the singer was born, the Assembly of God church where he worshiped, a memorial chapel and an indoor/outdoor theater.

"The money from the state will be used to upgrade a small lake on the property and make it a place of meditation with a walking trail, seating areas and some story walls for them along the way to read stories about young Elvis," Guyton said. "As far as pure tourist attractions, we're considered the No. 1 tourist attraction in Mississippi. We feel like we're bringing more people into the state than anyone else for tourism."

"We would like to have people to stay with us longer. The more things we have in our park that they can do, the longer they will stay."

Officials from the Jackson Zoo did not return calls for comment. The bill says the money would pay for "construction, repair, renovation, replacement and improvement of buildings, facilities, exhibits and infrastructure."

Both attractions have received state money before. The zoo got \$500,000 last year, and the museum received more than \$2 million three years ago —with the city of Tupelo matching 20

percent — to fund the first part of what has become a \$6 million expansion and renovation project.

Nonprofits run the attractions on property owned by the respective cities.

It's not without precedent in Mississippi to spend the state's money on tourist attractions. The Legislature this past session approved \$2.5 million to build a museum in Tremont, hometown of the late country singer Tammy Wynette.

“These projects are a small portion of Mississippi's budget but illustrate the direction of the state's finances,” Kaeding said. “Taxpayer revenues should be spent on essential government services. These projects do not rise to that level.”