

**State of the State Address of Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam**  
**“Why Tennessee is Different”**  
**January 28, 2013**

Lt. Gov. Ramsey, Speaker Harwell, Speaker Pro Tem Watson, Speaker Pro Tem Johnson, Members of the 108<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, Justices, Constitutional Officers, Commissioners, friends, guests, fellow Tennesseans, and always my favorite First Lady, Crissy:

Every day, I feel honored and blessed to have the opportunity to serve as governor of this great state, and I particularly appreciate the invitation by the 108<sup>th</sup> General Assembly tonight to report on the state of our State.

I'll begin with something we all know – Tennessee is different. We're known as the Volunteer State. We have a history of independence and service. Over the years, we've been intentional about avoiding the traps that Washington, D.C. and other states have fallen into that have gotten them in trouble time and time again.

Unlike the news coming out of our nation's capital and so many other states around the country, good things are happening in Tennessee. *Barron's Magazine* has named us the third best-managed state in the country. We are ranked among the lowest when it comes to the state and local tax burden on our citizens as well as the debt per capita. We are a triple-A rated state, and our most recent bond sale was done at the lowest interest rates in recorded history. The unemployment rate continues to fall, and family incomes continue to rise. CNBC ranks us 4<sup>th</sup> in America for transportation and infrastructure and 2<sup>nd</sup> in cost of living. And we've been ranked the best place in the country to retire. Tennesseans are some of the most generous in the United States – we rank 4<sup>th</sup> in charitable giving.

So what makes Tennessee different? Why are we coming out of one of the worst recessions this country has ever seen in a place of strength? I believe it's because we think differently. We have a long history of fiscal restraint that crosses party lines. We have been deliberate about not spending money that we don't have and in making a concerted effort to save for the future. A good example was last year when there was temptation for some to quickly commit and spend funds that were coming in above estimates, but in the tradition of our state's discretion, we held the line. And now we are well-positioned to continue to invest in a thoughtful, strategic manner.

Unlike Congress, this body is willing to make hard decisions. You've voted to cut the budget; you've voted to make key investments; and you've voted to set reserves aside for the future. You've also given Tennesseans their money back by cutting taxes, and you've given the executive branch the necessary tools to run government better.

We are committed to transforming state government so that our customers, Tennessee's taxpayers, are the primary focus. A good example is our driver's license centers. The budget I'm proposing tonight contains funding to put more resources toward lowering wait times across the state.

Two years ago, I stood up here and said that we would be working hard to speed up the process to receive a license, and we're making progress. At the Fayette County center, wait times went from an average of 38 minutes in 2011, to 30 minutes in 2012, and only 18 minutes in the month of December. Tonight, I'd like you to meet Patsy Echols, the manager of that center, named Center of the Year for 2012. Patsy, thanks to you and your team for giving our customers – Tennessee's taxpayers - great service.

In Tennessee, we are different. We have a lot to brag about, but this isn't the time to coast along or to be satisfied. This is a time to take advantage of our strengths and face our challenges head on, and I look forward to the executive and legislative branches working together on the issues that matter to Tennesseans.

I believe we have to begin this evening by addressing the elephant in the room – or I guess I should say the elephants in the room. There are a lot of expectations and preconceived notions about how our Republican supermajority is going to govern. There is a narrative already being written for us this legislative session: Republicans will be fighting internally, and Democrats will be focused solely on playing politics instead of working across the aisle to find common ground for good government. But I think that makes caricatures out of us and sells all of us short.

We're not always going to agree on what good policy is, and the way democracy works is that people in this room were elected for different reasons and often times because of specific issues, but can't we all agree that in the end, the focus should be and will be on a better Tennessee?

Howard Baker, a senior statesman from Tennessee who served as Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate and chief of staff to President Ronald Reagan always says, anytime he was sitting across the desk from someone in disagreement, he told himself to keep in mind, "You know - the other fellow might be right."

As we go through this legislative session, I ask everyone in this chamber this evening to keep in mind what Senator Baker said: "The other fellow might be right." Tennesseans don't want us to be like Washington. They don't want continuous conflict. They do want principled problem solving.

Over the past two years, we've made a lot of progress in working together. We balanced two budgets in tough economic times with less funding from the federal government, which by the way I believe is a good thing. It's critical that Washington gets serious about getting our country's financial house in order. And in Tennessee, we're prepared to manage state government accordingly.

In talking about the budget, it's also important to talk about what we did not do to balance the budget the past two years. We didn't raise taxes. In fact, we lowered them. We cut the state portion of the sales tax on food from five and a half percent to five and a quarter percent, and we're proposing to lower it to five percent this year. We're phasing out the inheritance tax, eliminating it entirely by the year 2016 to help small business owners and family farmers keep those businesses in the family from generation to generation. We've eliminated the gift tax, and in 2011, we reduced the burden of the Hall Income Tax on seniors.

We are proposing to cut the Hall tax even further this year by raising the exemption level for people over 65 from \$26,000 to \$33,000 for individuals and \$37,000 to \$59,000 for joint filers. We are also providing tax relief for low-income seniors, veterans and the disabled by fully funding the growth of the property tax relief program.

Another important thing we did not do to balance the budget was to cut education funding. Not only did we not cut funding, we had the second largest increase in state K-12 expenditures of all 50 states in fiscal year 2012. I'm not sure that Tennessee has ever been able to say that before. The average increase was nearly 3 percent. Ours grew almost 12 percent in state education funding. Education is another example of how in Tennessee we're distinguishing ourselves as different from the rest of the country.

Some have said that this administration and General Assembly aren't committed to public education, but that could not be further from the truth. We are literally putting our money where our mouth is, even when other states haven't done so through tough budget times. This administration is absolutely committed to public education and understands that the large majority of our students attend public schools and always will.

That's why we've fully funded the Basic Education Program the past two years and are doing so again this year. That's why tonight I'm announcing that we will invest \$51 million to assist locals in paying for technology transition upgrades in schools across the state – a substantial and strategic investment in our schools. Another \$34 million is budgeted to address ongoing capital needs that can be used for increased security measures if local officials decide to do so. And more than \$35 million is budgeted for teacher salaries. We're also providing \$22 million for a new high school for the Tennessee School for the Deaf in Knoxville.

Our administration's three budgets have certainly supported our commitment to public education, but I also think it's important to note that we're not just throwing money at it. Dollars alone don't lead to improvement. There has to be a plan. Along with strategic investments, we're pursuing real reform in education that is producing results.

We've addressed tenure so that a principal doesn't have to decide after three years to either fire a teacher or grant tenure. There is now a five year time period for the principal to use data more effectively to assess a teacher's performance and then allow time to give that teacher the additional support that he or she needs to improve to earn tenure.

We've expanded charter schools to eliminate the cap on the number that we can have in Tennessee and to offer more students the opportunity to attend a charter school.

This year we're proposing to offer another option for school choice through a program to allow low-income students in our lowest performing schools a chance to receive a better education. I've heard the argument that this kind of program will drain resources in the schools that need them the most, but we're focusing resources on those schools. Last year, we committed \$38 million over three years to schools in the bottom 5 percent of the state. This year we're adding \$9 million more. So we're investing \$47 million, over and above annual funding, to those

schools to help them improve. Not only are we not draining resources from them, we're giving them additional support.

I expect this proposal will be hotly debated, but after taking a careful look at the issue and how a program might work in Tennessee, I believe a limited approach that gives more choice to parents and students stuck in difficult situations makes a lot of sense. If we can help our lowest income students in our lowest performing schools, why wouldn't we?

To us education should be first and foremost about our students, it's not about systems. And in the end we know that all of the money or education reforms in the world aren't ultimately what impact the education of our children. It is the great teacher that stands before a classroom every day and commits to making sure the children in his or her classroom are learning.

It hasn't always been easy as we've moved to higher standards of accountability. But shouldn't we all – parents, educators, legislators, and the governor - be accountable when something as important as our children's future is at stake?

In Tennessee, 55,000 more students are proficient or advanced in 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade math than they were two years ago. There are 38,000 more students that are proficient or advanced in science. Tennessee is one of only two states making double-digit gains in high school graduation rates, and we saw the largest aggregate gains ever in our TCAP testing scores last year.

Tonight, I'd like for you to meet one of the many teachers across the state on the front lines of making this happen. Hope Malone is a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Avoca Elementary School in Bristol. She is a reward school ambassador that will spend this year sharing best teaching practices with other teachers and schools across the state. After moving from teaching 2<sup>nd</sup> grade to 5<sup>th</sup> grade several years ago, she had a tough adjustment period. She pursued technical assistance and grew to become a level 5 teacher - the highest rating in our evaluation system – in two years. Hope, thank you for your commitment to your students and for your willingness to share what you've learned with others.

With the progress we're seeing in K-12 education, the time is right to include post-secondary education in our focus. Over the past 30 years, Medicaid costs have continued to squeeze out other priorities, and higher education has been an area that has suffered as a result.

With repeated tuition increases year after year, we risk pricing middle class families out of the market for a college education. We must address cost. We have to make a college education more accessible, and we have to make sure that we have quality programs in Tennessee.

I've spent a lot of time over the past year learning all I can about these issues - on a national level and what's happening here in Tennessee. These aren't challenges that we're going to solve overnight.

But like in K-12 education, Tennessee is getting attention on a national level for our efforts in higher ed. Last fall, *Time Magazine* highlighted our Complete College program as a model for other states. In the past, the state has provided funding for our colleges and universities based on

enrollment. Today, we base funding on the number of students who are actually graduating. This shift puts the focus where it should be – on graduates. And because we’re seeing results, this year’s budget fully funds, for the first time, the Complete College Act outcomes formula.

The leaders of the Tennessee Board of Regents and UT system have pledged that because of this funding, they will limit tuition increases to no more than 6 percent at four-year schools and no more than 3 percent at two-year schools. That will provide relief to Tennessee families that have faced double digit tuition increases for too long.

But even with this progress, we still have a lot of work ahead of us. Only 32 percent of Tennesseans have earned an associates’ degree or higher. That’s not good enough. Our goal is to move the needle so that Tennessee is on track to raise that number to 55 percent by 2025. Tonight we begin our “drive to 55” – a strategic initiative to have the best trained workforce in America.

To do that, we must improve affordability and access in higher education. To help us achieve this goal, we’re partnering with Western Governors University to establish “WGU Tennessee.” It is an online, competency-based university that is geared to the 800,000 adult Tennesseans that have some college credit but didn’t graduate with an associate or four-year degree. The program is unique because of its competency-based curriculum but also because of an emphasis on mentors who guide those adults through the academic process.

On the affordability front, we are proposing to establish an endowment of \$35 million using operational reserve funds from the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC). It is designed to provide nearly \$2 million each year to support scholarships for “last dollar” scholarship programs such as tnAchieves. These scholarships fill the gaps between students’ financial aid and the real costs of college including books, supplies, room and board.

Last summer, I traveled the state visiting with employers and educators about ways we can do a better job of matching the skills we’re teaching our students with the real-life skills that employers are looking for to fill jobs. Out of those conversations, one thing I heard consistently is that our technology centers are having a lot of success. They’re graduating nearly 79 percent of their students, and close to 80 percent are getting jobs, and there are jobs available for the specific skills they’re preparing their students for in communities across the state. Their challenges are with capacity and equipment. To help them train more people to fill demand of Tennessee employers, \$16.5 million are in the budget for equipment and technology related to workforce development programs at our technology centers and community colleges.

We’re also funding a new technical education complex at Northeast State Community College in the Tri Cities that will be directly tied to advanced manufacturing in the region. The budget also allows for a much-needed multi-purpose classroom and lab building at Nashville State Community College as it continues to grow exponentially in Middle Tennessee.

Another constant theme we heard in our statewide discussions is that there is no substitute for direct and timely communication and cooperation between businesses and educational institutions. I am really excited about a new state-of-the-art technology center in Smyrna that

represents a unique public-private partnership with Nissan. The center won't only be committed to training employees to work at Nissan but will teach the skills that other area businesses need as well. This project is exactly what we need to be doing across the state to directly link Tennesseans to high quality jobs by being deliberate in providing relevant training for those jobs.

And there are other good things happening in Tennessee in this regard, such as, The Degree Compass program at Austin Peay University. This program is designed to predict the subjects and majors in which students will be most successful. The model combines hundreds of thousands of past students' grades with current students' transcripts to make an individualized recommendation. It's inspired by companies like Netflix, Amazon and Pandora that tailor their recommendations to what their customers are looking for. That's exactly what we should be doing. Helping our students find the subjects and skills that are avenues for success.

The Degree Compass system has gotten national attention. I'd like to take this opportunity to recognize Austin Peay Provost Dr. Tristan Denley for his innovation in developing this system. Thank you for being here and for your efforts on behalf of our students.

We are continuing our commitment to put dollars toward strategic capital investments that have been on hold for far too long. We're putting \$60 million toward maintenance of our educational institutions across the state, and nearly \$250 million is budgeted to fund key projects. Along with the technology center and community college projects I mentioned earlier, the budget includes nearly \$45 million to build a new Community Health Facility at the University of Memphis for audiology, speech pathology and nursing.

The University of Tennessee Health Sciences Center in Memphis will receive nearly \$62 million to renovate a four building complex that will house research labs and administrative offices.

So by now it should be clear that education will continue to be on the front burner and that this administration is committed to public education. The reason is simple; to be the number one state in the Southeast for high quality jobs, we have to have a well-educated workforce to attract and fill those jobs. We want our state to be the place where our best and brightest want to earn their degrees and ultimately work, live and raise a family.

Since January 2011, nearly 80,000 new jobs have been created in Tennessee, and the unemployment rate is the lowest it's been since October 2008. Tennessee ranks first in the Southeast in new manufacturing jobs created and first in the growth of manufacturing jobs in 2012. That's good news, but it doesn't mean we can take our foot off of the gas.

You've heard me say many times before that I don't believe government creates jobs, but I do believe it's our role to create an environment that encourages investment. Jobs are created when people are willing to risk capital. We want Tennessee to be as low of a risk as possible.

To provide certainty to businesses, we overhauled our tort laws. To build on those efforts, this year we're proposing legislation to reform our worker's compensation laws. During my first year in office, I held business roundtables across the state where we heard from businesses over and over that worker's comp is an issue in Tennessee. We spent last year working with

stakeholders to find ways to improve our system with a focus on fairness to both the employee and employer, and we believe the worker's comp bill we're proposing does just that.

There are a lot of reasons for people to come to our state. From blues on Beale Street to racing in Bristol; from Dollywood and the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, to Market Square in Knoxville, to the Chattanooga Aquarium, to the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville and thousands of places in between. In Tennessee, tourism equals jobs. We have unique and popular assets across the state, and it's time that we do a better job of not only working to attract people to specific sites but to leverage our resources and have a strategic plan to market our state and tourist attractions. We are including \$8 million for a statewide tourism fund to support the work of the tourism commission I appointed shortly after taking office. The industry is already working together in ways that have never happened before.

In everything we do, we look through the lens of delivering state services in the most efficient and effective way possible.

We've put a strong emphasis on customer service. As state employees, our job is to provide services to taxpayers that they can't get on their own.

Through the TEAM Act, we tackled state government's antiquated employment system and shifted our culture from an emphasis on seniority to a focus on performance. We're allowing managers to recruit the best and brightest to serve in state government, and we're establishing a merit-based pay system instead of only generic, across the board cost of living adjustments.

Now we're taking the next step in our mission to attract and reward top-notch employees. We want to continue attracting employees like Dr. Marion Kainer, an epidemiologist with the Department of Health.

Dr. Kainer played a central role in identifying the cause of the nationwide meningitis outbreak and getting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention involved. Dr. Kainer camped out in her Nashville office, and worked around the clock for weeks. She told ABC News back in November, "I brought in an exercise mat, with a pillow and a blanket and a change of clothes."

Dr. Kainer, we'd like to thank you for your service to our state and to our nation during what was an extremely tense and scary time. Thank you.

And we know that Dr. Kainer wasn't the only one sleeping in her office over those weeks. She represents a team of hundreds of Department of Health employees who were committed to understanding a complex situation with a lot of moving parts, and communicating quickly to patients, colleagues, other states, citizens and the media as appropriate. I think that they saved countless lives.

To help us attract and maintain the best and brightest employees throughout all levels of state government, we have to look at compensation. This year we are including an across the board pay raise for state employees of one and a half percent. We've also followed through on our commitment to conduct a salary survey to identify positions throughout state government where

we're not competing with the private sector. We're including a total of nearly \$60 million to address necessary salary adjustments resulting from the salary study.

Our employees deal with complex issues. As we raise the bar in terms of expectations, we also have to be ready to pay them more.

As part of this process, the Treasurer has reminded us that the sustainability of our state pension plan has to be part of an overall review, so we will be working with him as we evaluate compensation and benefits.

I can stand up here all night and tell you what we're accomplishing, but what I think really matters is that we're measuring our results. Shortly after the State of the State last year, we unveiled a dashboard that tracks key indicators to measure how we're doing compared to other states. While state government doesn't directly impact all of the measures, we believe each one of them is an important benchmark to gauge the overall welfare of our citizens. Many of you know that I'm a runner and a bike rider. Although, one that's getting a little bit older. I can always talk myself into thinking I'm as athletic as I used to be, but my watch tells me I'm not. It instantly holds me accountable. This is what the dashboard will do. You can find it on our state's website at [tn.gov](http://tn.gov).

Yogi Berra said it best, "If you don't know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else." It reminds me of when I coached pee wee T-ball. One of my five-year-olds made contact with the ball for the first time and ran straight to third base. That's not where we want to be as a state.

When we talk about where we are going, one of the most critical drivers is the state budget. How we spend taxpayer dollars should clearly reflect our priorities. These days it is hard to tell what may or may not come out of Washington. The federal government is famous for creating a program and then withdrawing the funds years later, which leaves state governments on the hook. Our philosophy is that if the federal government decides to quit funding a program, then unless there is an exceptional reason, we will not continue to fund that program with state dollars.

There has to be serious thought given to how government provides services, and in Tennessee we've started that process. But it can't be a matter of chipping away at the edges of business as usual or trimming back budgets.

A primary example is Medicaid. In this budget, TennCare costs will be 350 million dollars more this year than last year. That increase takes into account the higher cost of medical care, more people who qualify for Medicaid in tough economic times, and primarily, the impact of the Affordable Care Act. Expanding Medicaid is not reflected in this year's budget. I am hesitant to commit additional dollars to Medicaid when it's already eating up so much of our budget, and we have to remember what the state went through seven years ago when it made the difficult decision to cut a lot of people from the TennCare rolls.

We have to be very deliberate about making a decision to add that many and more back to the rolls, but I also understand that the decision isn't just as easy as standing here today and saying, "We're not going to expand Medicaid." There are hospitals across this state, many of them in rural communities, that are going to struggle if not close under the health care law without expansion, and that's not something to take lightly. Most of us in this room don't like the Affordable Care Act, but the decision to expand Medicaid isn't as basic as saying, "No ObamaCare, No expansion."

I plan to gather all of the information possible to understand the impact on our budget, the impact on community hospitals, the impact on health care in Tennessee, and the impact on our citizens. This decision is too important not to do that.

As we talk about health care costs, we also have to talk about the health of our citizens. This year Tennessee ranked 39<sup>th</sup> in overall health compared to 41<sup>st</sup> in 2011, and we rank 35<sup>th</sup> in obesity, which is also an improvement, but not good enough. When we talk about Medicaid costs consuming so much of our budget, improving the health of our citizens isn't only about their welfare but it's also about dollars and cents. We are in the process of working with local communities and business leaders to figure out how we can better partner to encourage healthy lifestyles across the state.

We are also supporting a partnership project between the University of Tennessee's Health Science Center in Memphis and St. Jude Hospital to recruit leading researchers from across the country to address critical issues such as childhood obesity.

We expect to receive funds relating to the tobacco arbitration settlement, and we are proposing to designate those dollars for programs that address health concerns related to disease prevention and also to air, water and environmental concerns, such as replacing the University of Tennessee's steam plant in Knoxville, one of the largest sources of pollution in Knox County.

Along with health care, other mandatory costs that often impact the state budget over a number of years are lawsuits. One of those lawsuits involves the Arlington Developmental Center in Memphis and has been ongoing for over 20 years. I am pleased to announce that the state has reached an agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice and the plaintiffs which was approved by the court just last week. Our budget includes \$10 million for the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to carry out the terms of the settlement agreement. Over the past two decades, this lawsuit has cost the state hundreds of millions of dollars. We are committed to care for Tennessee's most vulnerable citizens, and will continue to do so earnestly. I am grateful for Commissioner Jim Henry, the Attorney General's Office and the TennCare Bureau for all of their efforts to accomplish this significant milestone in moving past this lawsuit.

We are spending \$48 million in Corrections to compensate our local jails for housing more state prisoners. The department is working on a strategic plan to better predict and plan for our inmate population moving forward. These costs are another example of why our focus on education is crucial. The more educated our citizens are, the less problems we'll have with crime.

The rankings vary, but Tennessee was either first or second in violent crime last year. That is not something we are proud of and something we have to change. Shortly after taking office, I appointed a working group to take a comprehensive look at public safety issues. The group came up with a multi-year action plan to address three main goals: significantly reducing drug abuse and drug trafficking; curbing violent crime; and cutting the rate of repeat offenders.

The plan resulted in legislation last year focused on prescription drug abuse, domestic violence offenders, and violent offenders. This year we are proposing legislation to clarify the definition of gang offenses in actually making a list of them instead of relying on a vague interpretation of the current law. We believe this will give law enforcement more tools to curb gang violence. And we still have work to do on fighting meth and prescription drug abuse.

As we continue to fight the prescription drug abuse epidemic we face in Tennessee, we have to attack it from as many fronts as possible. We have model drug court programs in this state that are working, so our budget includes funding to expand these programs.

We are also investing in crisis stabilization units. We were all shocked by the events last December in Connecticut, and seeing those young faces and the faces of the teachers who sacrificed so much was heart wrenching. In the aftermath there has been a lot of talk about guns and schools, which is valid, but I also think there needs to be a larger conversation about mental health issues, identifying warning signs and getting people the help they need. These tragedies are larger than schools or movie theaters, and we want to commit resources to areas that will make a difference.

While we talk a lot about education, jobs and efficient and effective government, we also realize it's our job to provide vital services for those who can't provide for themselves – often times our most vulnerable citizens. We don't take that responsibility lightly. While we may have been elected on different issues and might focus on different missions, we all came to serve. I think we can all agree that caring for citizens who need it the most is a very important part of why we're here.

The Department of Children's Services will be upgrading nearly 200 case manager positions. This won't just be a matter of paying current employees more but raising the qualifications for those positions. Children's services deals with very difficult family situations, and we ask a lot of our caseworkers who are walking straight into these homes to protect Tennessee children. We should be paying them more, and we should also do a better job of setting them up for success by making sure they have the skills and experience it takes to do these emotional and difficult jobs. We are also putting more resources toward investigations and assessments in our Child Protective Services division.

Our military veterans have sacrificed more than most of us can ever begin to imagine. Veterans have more than earned our respect, gratitude and support. For those in this room that have served our country, I'd like to ask you to stand, so we can thank you for your service.

In continuing our commitment to a project we started last year, this budget includes more than \$4 million for the Montgomery County veteran's home.

Another responsibility we take seriously is the long term fiscal health of our state. We understand the importance of saving for the future.

In 2008, the state's Rainy Day Fund was \$750 million dollars. During the recession, it was taken down to \$257 million. Working with the General Assembly, we've added nearly \$100 million back to the fund over the two years we have been in office. I am proposing to put \$100 million more into the Rainy Day Fund in this budget with the goal of ultimately reaching pre-recession levels. We've seen the realities of rainy days, and it is our responsibility to make sure the state is prepared for them in the future.

When dealing with serious issues that face our state, our approach is always going to be to put a lot of thought in getting to the right answer. Many times we're dealing with a conflict between two conservative principles, or situations where the answer might seem easy on the face of it but can have unintended consequences. Having strong values and principles doesn't preclude any of us from being deliberate and thoughtful.

For example, when it comes to judicial selection, it's no secret that I am strongly opposed to partisan, contested elections. And since taking office, my experience has been that the judicial selection commission has done its job in providing quality candidates. So for me this issue isn't about fixing something that isn't working, but instead, it is about hearing legitimate concerns and providing clarity.

A resolution will be before you this session to amend our Constitution. The amendment will do three things. It will continue judicial appointments by the governor, and our process will still be based on merit; it will preserve retention elections; and it will give the Legislature a process to confirm the appointments. I believe this provides clarity for those who have concerns about our current process. I also believe that it makes sense to preserve the current process until the people have a chance to vote in 2014. Making changes in the meantime does nothing but confuse the situation further.

Tennessee is unique in so many ways. We have so much going for us, and we know what our weaknesses are. It is up to us to address those weaknesses; those issues that Tennesseans care about. People want good quality jobs. People want their children to have the best education possible, and as a state we should want the same for those kids. One day they're going to be the ones that we hand the reins to. And taxpayers expect us to be good stewards of the taxes they pay.

People are disheartened by what happens – or it's probably more accurate to say what doesn't happen – in Washington. They're tired of all the talk about the problems our nation faces with not many people trying to work together to find solutions. Tennessee is different in that regard, and we want to keep it that way. Here in Tennessee, we're willing to make the tough decisions. We're willing to put politics aside and really focus on what's right for our state and citizens. That makes us different, and we shouldn't lose sight of those unique qualities.

One of my favorite movies is Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and one of the most memorable scenes is when Butch and Sundance are trapped at the edge of a cliff, high above a river, when the posse that's been pursuing them for hundreds of miles catches up.

Butch says, "Alright, I'll jump first." Sundance replies, "No."

"Then you jump first," Butch says, but Sundance says, "No."

"What's the matter with you?" Butch asks. "I can't swim," Sundance says. "Are you crazy,"

Butch says, "The fall will probably kill you."

Sundance was caught up in his own issues and missed the big picture. It's our job to identify and focus on the real problems. We have this rare opportunity to make a difference. I know you feel like I do that every day we come to work in this building is a blessing and a privilege.

Let's remember what makes Tennessee so special. It's our responsibility to the citizens of this state to get it right, and this is our opportunity to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. That truly is service in the best meaning of the word.

Thank you and thanks for caring enough to give of yourself for a better Tennessee.

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