

"The Plane, the Plane!"

A Brief Examination of the Expense Associated with Saunders' Plane

USM President Martha Saunders' decision [to lease](#) a Beechcraft King Air turbo-prop airplane in 2009, in the midst of multi-million dollar budget shortfalls facing the University, will most likely go down as one of the more egregious acts of her presidency. That [plane](#), which was purchased by the USM Foundation and is being leased to USM, is [costing](#) Mississippi taxpayers **\$31,500 per month**, based on a 5-year lease (60 months) agreement at **\$1.89 million**.

Table 1
The Cost of Executive Travel at USM: What Is vs. What Could Be

Dates of Travel	Journey Description	Planegate	By Car
5-Feb-2009	Roundtrip: Hattiesburg & Jackson	\$10,500	\$ 99.55
11-Feb-2009	Roundtrip: Hattiesburg & Columbus	\$10,500	\$199.43
27-Feb-2009	Roundtrip: Hattiesburg & LaPlace, LA	<u>\$10,500</u>	<u>\$150.04</u>
		\$31,500	\$449.02

Notes: The "Planegate" amounts are found by dividing \$31,500 (monthly plane lease) by the number of trips taken during the month. The "By Car" amounts are found by multiplying round-trip distances (mapquest.com) by car times \$0.55 (the federal mileage reimbursement rate). The third trip actually involved Hattiesburg and "St. John the Baptist Parish" in Louisiana. That parish's largest city is LaPlace (50% of the Parish's population).

Table 1 above shows the cost of the [three trips](#) using the presidential plane that were made by unknown USM officials during February of 2009. These trips were to/from Jackson, MS, Columbus, MS, and St. John the Baptist Parish (LaPlace), LA. Each of these trips, which ranged in distance from 90.5 miles to 181.3 miles, cost MS taxpayers \$10,500 using Saunders' plane. By all accounts, trips to Jackson, LaPlace, etc., should have been *drives*, not *flights*. Using the federal mileage reimbursement rate of \$0.55 per mile, these trips should have cost MS taxpayers between \$99.55 and \$199.43 each. In total, using Saunders' plane for these three trips cost MS taxpayers \$31,500, not including the pilot's salary, fringe benefits, etc. By car, these trips would have cost MS taxpayers just \$449.02. The difference between the actual cost (\$31,500) and the should have cost (\$449.02) is a staggering **\$31,050.98!**

When USM provost Robert Lyman visiting the USM faculty senate to describe the lease of the plane, he indicated that its use and cost could be reviewed after some time. After doing so, should the USM family determine that having a plane is an extravagance and not a necessity, the lease could simply be allowed to expire after 2013. Well, we already know, through analyses like that here, that Saunders' plane is just that – an extravagance.