



WEEKLY REPORT

State Senator Gary Nodler
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MISSOURI SENATE PASSES ITS VERSION OF THE FISCAL YEAR 2004 BUDGET

The Missouri Senate passed its version of the 2004 fiscal year budget on Wednesday. The budget is not what is desirable, but it is what's possible.

As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I helped put this budget together. The reality is, we faced the largest budget shortfall in the history of the State of Missouri. I describe it this way – we had to climb the Mount Everest of fiscal crisis.

Thanks to the hard work of Appropriations Chairman John Russell, the committee's ranking Democrat Wayne Goode, and the entire committee, we succeeded in putting together a balanced budget. The budget does contain cuts to some state programs including education and social services. No one wants to make cuts, but this year there simply was not enough money. Cuts had to be made, but we attempted to make those cuts as painless as possible.

We were able to protect vital state services like the children's health insurance program (CHIPS) and sheltered workshops.

The Senate's budget totals \$18.8 billion, slightly less than the current-year budget total of \$18.9 billion.

The budget contains contingency lines that will allow the state to spend around \$200 million more if the General Assembly succeeds in passing revenue-generating legislation that would produce additional money. We will be working on those bills for the remainder of the session.

The budget would allocate more than \$4.5 billion for public schools, and more than \$1 billion for public colleges and universities. The committee made the same across-the-board cuts to all state universities. But a baseline equity adjustment was made to the budgets of Missouri Southern State College, Missouri Western State College, Northwest Missouri State University

and Southwest Missouri State University. The Coordinating Board of Higher Education said that these institutions have been underfunded. We used the Coordinating Board's recommendations to make funding more equitable.

Transportation programs would receive \$1.7 billion, agriculture programs – which are vital to Southwest Missouri – would receive \$34 million, and natural resources would get \$331 million. Conservation would receive \$127 million and economic development programs would receive \$274 million.

Public Safety, which includes the Highway Patrol, would receive \$349 million, while the Department of Social Services, the state's largest budget category, would receive \$5.6 billion.

Mental health programs would receive \$943 million and the state's judiciary would receive \$158 million.

Some of the cuts are actually positive. The budget package calls for major reductions in agency equipment and expense budgets that have been the subject of many audits pointing to waste, fraud and abuse regarding state cars, taxpayer funded travel and excessive cell phone use. We all want government to be more efficient with taxpayer dollars.

Now that the House of Representatives and the Senate have both passed their respective budget packages, differences between the two spending plans will be worked out in conference committees. Under the Missouri Constitution, lawmakers must complete work on the budget by 6 p.m. one week before the end of the regular legislative session – this year that date falls on May 9.

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