

Weekly Report
April 23, 2004

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MISSOURI SENATE SUCCEEDS IN PASSING TORT REFORM LEGISLATION AND BUDGET FOR FISCAL YEAR 2005

The work of the Missouri Senate shut down briefly on Wednesday, when members of the minority party abruptly adjourned session at noon. It was an unprecedented partisan move made in an unsuccessful attempt to block passage of a tort reform bill.

The move surprised and disappointed majority party members and threatened to set our schedule behind at the most crucial time of year.

While there were numerous Republicans in the Senate side galleries, only a couple were on the floor. I was over in the House of Representatives presenting a bill to the Judiciary Committee.

Democrats took advantage of the empty seats and unexpectedly called for adjournment. The Democratic lieutenant governor was presiding and quickly ruled the motion in order and banged the gavel for adjournment.

It was definitely a slick move.

However, it might just backfire on the minority party and could do permanent damage to the Missouri Senate.

The Senate is a body of tradition and that's something that I am proud of.

On Thursday when session convened, Republicans shut down further debate on the tort reform bill by passing what is known as "the previous question," a rule that immediately shuts down debate on the issue.

It's a procedure that is routinely used in the Missouri House of Representatives, but has been utilized on five occasions in the Senate in the last 35 years.

That may have changed permanently.

From now on the majority party will do whatever we feel is necessary to carry out the business of the people of Missouri.

The tort reform bill did pass and has been sent to the governor.

For most of this session, Democrats have tried to filibuster tort reform – a top Republican priority. We wanted to pass the bill by April 23 so that the governor would be forced to sign or veto it by the end of session. According to the Missouri Constitution, the governor has 15 business days to act on any bill that's placed on his desk during a legislative session.

On Tuesday the budget was brought up for debate, and the minority party attempted to filibuster the budget in order to keep from bringing tort reform this week. Session adjourned after midnight with only one budget bill having passed.

I joined with other Republican lawmakers in encouraging Majority Leader Michael Gibbons to bring up the tort reform bill so that we could pass it once and for all and get down to the business of the budget.

As most of you undoubtedly recall, the General Assembly passed a tort reform measure last year that was vetoed by Gov. Bob Holden. This time we have tried to write a bill that has nothing in it that the governor will object to and that he will sign into law.

The bill has been sent to the governor's desk, the next move is his.

Despite the disruptions in the middle of the week, the Senate did succeed in passing its version of the budget.

Totaling \$18.8 billion, the fiscal year 2005 operating budget includes an increase in education.

Elementary and secondary education would receive a total of \$4.7 billion, not counting additional money for such items as busing and special education.

Higher education is scheduled to receive \$1.04 billion in state and federal funds, up almost \$19 million from this year.

East Central Community College would receive \$5.2 million, an increase of \$122,927 over the current fiscal year.

Amtrak is set to receive \$6.2 million in the budget – full funding for the first time in three years.

The Main Street program, which some communities in our area could take advantage of, will receive \$40,590.

Other provisions in the Senate's version of the FY 2005 budget:

- The Department of Transportation would receive a total of \$1.6 billion.
- The Department of Public Safety, which includes the Missouri Highway Patrol and the Missouri Water Patrol, would receive \$370 million, while the Department of Corrections would receive \$573.4 million.
- The Senate budget would allocate \$971 million for the Department of Mental Health.
- \$723 million was allocated for state employee benefits. This is an increase over last year's appropriation of \$652 million. The increased funding is intended to pay for salary adjustments, retirement benefits and increases in health care costs for state employees.

Final differences between the House and Senate versions of the budget will be worked out in joint conference committees made up of both senators and representatives. Lawmakers have until 6 p.m. May 7 to complete work on the budget. Once finalized, the budget will take effect on July 1.

If you are in Jefferson City, please feel free to stop by my office in Room 226 at the State Capitol. You may call me anytime at (800) 247-6102 or (573) 751-3678, or you may call my home at 239-2521 or 239-2523. My cell phone number is (314) 650-5777.