

# Challenges Still The Norm In Republican-Controlled Assembly, Says Senator

By Tracy Allen

Six years as a state representative was long enough for Senator Yvonne Wilson (D-9<sup>th</sup> District) to gauge what to expect out of this year's General Assembly session in Jefferson City.

A dogfight.

With a Republican-controlled House and Senate, not to mention, Republican Governor, Kansas City's newest 9<sup>th</sup> District Senator is learning as she did in the previous few years that she may have to get tough. Programs are likely to be hit again this session and of course, representatives from communities like Kansas City and St. Louis could be dealing with a plate of little stew as the Republican agenda will be the agenda for at least four more years.

But, Sen. Wilson understands what she's facing. She dealt with it as a state representative. She saw the bickering and yes, stubbornness that took place across the aisle of the General Assembly floor. She knows full well it won't be easy getting her idea across, the same as it was for former Senator Mary Groves Bland, who left the seat following term limitations in December.

Sen. Wilson is determined, though, to at least make a say about what she feels is needed for her constituents, mainly those living in central Kansas City.

She's been in the Senate seat for almost a month now and already, she knows the glaring looks and yes, stubborn ways she's got to deal with for the next four years.

One thing Sen. Wilson says she has done is develop relationships on both sides of the aisle, but she knows that doesn't always mean there will come change. Compromise, possibly, but change could be difficult.

"It is going to be extremely difficult and already, we've seen the kind of atmosphere we're going to have to work under," said Sen. Wilson, who noted the committee assignments have been hard to come by for some Democratic representatives. She noted one committee which started out with 15 and was soon reduced to 10. "so that (Republicans) could have the majority vote with seven and the Democrats only have three just so that they can make sure there will be no money there to initiate any new programs or programs initiated by the Democrats, "which they are simply not going to preserve."

If there comes a fight, the budget will be a major issue, Sen. Wilson said. It always is. But, this year may present even more problems especially with education, social programs and yes, health care, all programs that the Democrats and Republicans differ tremendously.

Sen. Wilson mentioned how tough it was just to keep the Chips program, which would give health care insurance to the state's most vulnerable, children. Medicare benefits has also been an issue in the Assembly.

"Yes, I already see problems. There's going to be a struggle," said Sen. Wilson. "But, we're going to continue to speak loudly to maintain those programs."

"Only the programs that are Republican-oriented will be heard," said Sen. Wilson. "We see the big projects that are wanted, and let me say this, while I was appointed to the Budget Committee, I opted not to remain on the committee and there's a political reason for doing that. The majority didn't want the person when it was at 13 and we weren't going to be



able to have one more person with that committee. That person would have been the former chair of the Budget Committee with whom I worked with as Vice Chair of the Budget Committee. That person knew where everything was in the House, where everything was in the Committee, knew the revenue stream and still, has all the information about the funding and the cuts and the variations. That person is a threat to the Appropriations Committee because the make-up of the (Appropriations) Committee is very new to budgeting."

Sen. Wilson says she came off the (Budget) Committee to allow a Democrat who knows about budgeting and funding, and who can help preserve what is needed for the ordinary citizen. "I want the Republicans on that committee to be properly challenged so that they know what direction needs to be taken." She said.

And hopefully, that will include doing what is best for those in Kansas City too.

Education is also a concern, says Sen. Wilson. Districts in Missouri are still facing the budget crunch of the past few years and Sen. Wilson, who

was also appointed to the Education Committee, doesn't expect any more money to come their way either.

The Kansas City, MO., School district lost out on almost \$18 million in funding just in 2004.

"We are looking at that foundation formula which is extremely important and we need to stay in the forefront of looking at adequate funding and also, funding that is going to be equitable for these urban school districts like Kansas City and St. Louis," Sen. Wilson said.

She also said that she will work and look into the *No Child Left Behind Act* that has been mandated by the Federal government, to see what she and others can do to make it work properly for all children.

And, of course, vouchers will be a touchy subject. Sen. Wilson says the majority party is already talking about heading that direction.

With all that's on her plate, Sen. Wilson understands the work she faces. But, she also ask her constituents in the central city to be patient and recognize, a new order (Republican) is now in charge and what is needed may not come that easily.

Or, at least not without a serious battle within the General Assembly.

But, she's rolled up her sleeves. She's ready for the battle. And, thanks to her predecessors, Sen. Bland and Sen. (Phil) Curls, she believes she can carry on the torch that was handed her.

"We've had two very good senators in Sen. Bland and Sen. Curls," said Sen. Wilson. "They represented our community very well and I look forward to going in and looking at the needs of the constituents of the 9<sup>th</sup> Senatorial District."

"I want to do whatever I can for the citizens of Kansas City."

"I'm just going in there and doing just what I did when I was in the House," Sen. Wilson said. "I didn't have any coaching. It's just a matter of fitting in, rolling up your sleeves and go to work."

"I've learned overall, that either you're a Democrat or you're a Republican," she said. "You want to be viewed as what you really are. If you have that interpersonal skill to say to the person on the other side, 'I respect your views and I want you to respect mine.' There are some things we can agree on, and you go into this knowing you'll have some differences but a lot of times, you don't have those differences."

### **Budget Issues**

Senator Yvonne Wilson agrees with the new governor's focus on funding Missouri's educational system, but vehemently opposes the budget cuts that he proposes.

"I applaud his focus on education by making sure that it is funded properly, but I do not believe that it should come at the expense of the poor, our children, the elderly, the handicapped and those who really need the Medicaid program," Senator Wilson told THE CALL.

"There are other areas of the state budget that the money could come from that would have less of an impact on those who really depend on that program," said Senator Wilson.

"We have to get out of the rob Peter to pay Paul mentality in government. The health care providers are the ones guilty of defrauding the system not the patients as the governor stated in his speech," said the Senator.

"Gov. Blunt said in his campaign that he would not change the poverty

requirements and he has already changed the requirement from the poverty level being 75 percent to 30 percent. This simply means that a family of three living in poverty levels will have a more difficult time being able to get assistance through the Medicaid program for their healthcare needs," Senator Wilson added.

"The governor's focus is on big business and public education. We have to be careful and watch how he defines public education because that could include charter schools. Our education committee has been battling over name changes. Some want to change the names from college to university. These arguments have nothing to do with improving education." She continued.

Senator Wilson also stated that the \$875,000 set aside to combat youth smoking by young people is not enough money to address the problem. Senator Wilson has proposed a bill that would properly fund the program

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*Eric L. Wesson contributed to this article.*

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