



WEEKLY REPORT

State Senator Gary Nodler
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A Budget of Priority and Respect

JEFFERSON CITY – After the conference committee of which I was a member reached a consensus this week on the details of the state budget, the 13-bill fiscal package was sent to the Senate floor. To get a budget to the governor by May 6 as constitutionally required, the legislature deliberated the appropriation bills throughout the week. After many hours of thorough consideration, we approved a final budget that is—to describe in one word—respectful.

This budget respects the state constitution's mandate to make education funding a top priority. This budget respects the constitutional prohibition of deficit spending. This budget respects the constitutional limitation of the legislature's power to raise taxes. This budget respects the voice of the people of Missouri who have twice resoundingly said “No” to increasing their own tax burden.

Undeniably, the past year has been exceedingly challenging, forcing lawmakers to make difficult decisions in accordance with the state's financial situation. Former leaders of this state vastly expanded Medicaid eligibility, which created a budget monster that consumed all resources in its path. This was the year to confront the monster.

Think for a moment about the term “Non-Medicaid Eligible.” These are non-Medicaid eligible individuals receiving medical assistance. In other words, state money has been provided to individuals based on qualifications other than Medicaid eligibility criteria. Because of that, a number of individuals in this state have grown dependent on state assistance. Certainly everyone should have compassion for disabled people who face challenges that healthy individuals will never be able to fully comprehend. Although many beneficiaries have gained their rightful entitlement because of disability or some other cause, there are some who have been taking advantage of the good-intentioned system. The ones I refer to are those who have fostered a dependence on state funds for services even though they do not have a true

financial need. These actions are a disservice to those who *do* need state-provided health care and have hurt Missouri as a whole.

The \$19.2-billion budget that we sent to the governor refocuses the state's attention on the need to provide a social safety net to assist those who are *truly* unable to provide for themselves, *truly* unable to work, and *truly* unable to help pay for their own health care. That is why we shifted \$2.3 million from funding capital expenditures, such as constructing new state buildings, and put the money toward personal assistants for severely disabled people. Most Missourians expect beneficiaries to, at the very least, contribute to their own care to the extent they have resources to do so. This budget respects that expectation.

Our final fiscal plan has reestablished education as the state's first priority by bolstering direct funding for elementary and secondary education with a more-than \$100-million increase from last year's spending, and we have also prevented further cuts to Missouri's system of higher education. We are determined to commit the appropriate resources to secure the future of our state.

The budget that will soon go before the governor imparts the state legislature's respect for Missouri. It respects the state constitution. It respects the limits in state government imposed by the people. It respects the clear direction of Missouri voters' mandate to live with our means. And it respects our duty as legislators to make decisions according to the priorities set by the people of the great state of Missouri.

The governor must sign the budget before it goes into effect for Fiscal Year 2006, which begins July 1. The First Regular Session of the 93rd General Assembly adjourns May 13. The last week will be devoted to rewriting the public education funding formula and other issues of significance to the people of Missouri. Any bills that are not passed by the time the General Assembly adjourns next Friday cannot be taken up again until next year. Our work as legislators, however, continues throughout the year. It is a distinct honor to be of service to the 32nd Senate District.

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*Senator Gary Nodler represents the people of Newton, Jasper
and Dade counties in the Missouri Senate.*