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Lawmakers Kick Off 2006 Legislative Session

The 2006 session is now underway, and lawmakers have many high-priority measures to address in the coming months. This session I have identified several key issues that I will be focusing on in 2006. Increasing penalties for sex offenders, promoting ethical adult stem cell research, protecting funding for our schools, strengthening Missouri's laws protecting private property rights and fixing I-70 are all top priorities of mine for the 2006 session. I have addressed many of these issues with the following legislation.

Senate Bill 588 will strengthen Missouri's laws against sex offenders by improving mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines and cracking down on repeat offenders. Missouri's mandatory minimum sentences are weak and insufficient. For example, first-degree rape of a child less than 14 years old has a mandatory penalty of just five years in prison. Although many judges will hand down stricter sentences, I do not want these sorts of pedophiles to have the chance to walk away after only five years. Under SB588, sexual offenders guilty of first-degree rape or sodomy against pre-pubescent children will serve a minimum of 25 years in prison without the possibility of early release.

I am also sponsoring Senate Bill 774, which provides funding for umbilical cord blood banks and ethical stem cell research. The bill will provide several million dollars in tobacco settlement funds for research on stem-cell-rich umbilical cord blood and for research on other sources of non-controversial adult stem cells. This ethical research, which does not harm human life, has provided approximately 65 treatments currently in use.

Another of my high-priority bills is Senate Bill 651, which will rein in an out-of-hand economic development system and benefit Missouri schools. Tax Increment Financing, or TIF, is designed to foster economic development by using a portion of tax revenues generated by new developments to help pay for construction.

Although TIF is a good way to attract economic growth, private developers are becoming increasingly dependent on this form of tax assistance, and local schools are suffering because commercial growth is responsible for much of the property tax revenue that funds new schools. My bill requires future TIF projects to dedicate at least 10 percent of the tax that would otherwise be used to fund developments to any school within the boundary of the TIF area.

Finally, the Senate is moving full speed ahead with efforts to protect private property rights in the wake of a U.S. Supreme Court decision that opened the door to government taking away people's land through eminent domain for nearly any reason – not just for a true public use like a highway or a school.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.state.mo.us or by phone at (888) 711-9278.

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