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Rooting out Wasteful Spending

Last week's column discussed a little-known but very important office operated by the Missouri General Assembly that tunnels into government bureaucracy looking for wasteful spending. This office is known as the Oversight Division and is operated by a Joint Committee of the Legislature made up of an equal number of senators and state representatives. I have the privilege of serving on this committee and am pleased to report that over the past several years, several instances of wasteful spending have been uncovered. Here are some examples:

The Oversight Division brought to light that over a three-year period beginning in Fiscal Year 2000, more than \$2 million was paid to relocate employees of the Missouri Department of Transportation. Money that could have been spent moving dirt for new highways was instead being used to move employees.

Let me add a note of optimism here. In spite of some rocky times in the past, I am glad to see that in recent years this department has turned the corner and is now being much more careful in its spending practices. Its new leader appears to be a man of vision, and I have been impressed with his leadership, but it is important that we do not return to the old spending practices.

Another example of waste uncovered by the Oversight Division involved the Department of Mental Health. Here a review of Fiscal Year 2003 noted that providers for mental health services were overbilling the State of Missouri by an estimated \$95,000. It was also found that services for unidentified clients totaled \$19 million in Fiscal Year 2003, including \$8 million for crisis services. While many of these billings were no doubt for legitimate patients, this sort of imprecise record-keeping is exactly the type of practice that can easily lead to waste or fraud.

Another discovery in the Department of Mental Health's review from 2003 showed that \$3.2 million was spent with a particular vendor to build a software program for the department, but ultimately that vendor was dismissed for not completing the project and a new vendor had to be found. This matter was referred to the Attorney General for legal action in an attempt to recover the millions of taxpayer dollars that were wasted.

The State of Missouri is in many ways like a large corporation with hundreds of offices and thousands of employees. In any enterprise this large and diverse it is important that we maintain proper levels of oversight. The Legislature is helping to do this with the work of the Oversight Division, and the examples cited above demonstrate the value of this office. The governor's office is likewise committed to this goal and is constantly on the hunt for ways to cut wasteful spending. Together we will continue to work to provide excellent service to the people of this state.

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.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278.

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