

CAPITOL REPORT

Senator Luann Ridgeway

January 20, 2006

Senate called to 2006 Session

Overview for the busy reader. In this report you will find answers to these questions:

1. How many months and days of the week does the Missouri Senate meet in Jefferson City? What is a “citizen legislature”?
2. What’s pending that may give you more options (and perhaps lower the price) of television services and high speed internet to you and your communities?
3. Has Missouri’s economy and job market improved or gotten worse? Do we really have the **highest funding in Missouri history** for elementary and secondary education?

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The gavel has risen and fallen announcing the start of a new legislative session in the Missouri Senate. The Senate and House will now be in session in Jefferson City until mid-May.

Budget hearings are already well underway in the Senate. I serve on the Appropriations Committee and we have been meeting each Monday starting at 12:30 p.m. and each Tuesday and Wednesday at 8:00 a.m. We sometimes meet on Thursdays as well to conclude any unfinished business of the week.

The legislature is in session Monday to Thursday during the bulk of the January to May official session. Legislators travel from their homes around the state on Monday and return on Thursday afternoons to their homes, families and jobs.

It is important to remember that our legislature was never meant to be a full time job for elected House and Senate members. The intent was to keep us focused on our hometowns, our neighbors and our “real” jobs outside our work as a Senator or Representative. In other words, Missouri government was designed to have a “citizen legislature”, not a “full time politician” legislature.

For example, I drive home every Thursday from Jefferson City. On Friday, I go to my normal job. Sometimes I have a breakfast or luncheon meeting I have to attend as part of my legislative duties but, other than that, I’m working at my job in the private sector. Most legislators have some meetings to attend on Saturday to make sure we are staying in touch with the people we serve. I have made it a policy to not work at my private sector

job or at legislative duties on Sunday. My husband and I go to church, spend time with each other and family, and rest on that day. I play the piano/keyboard at our church and my husband runs the sound system, which is about all the “work” we do on Sunday. By Sunday evening, it’s time for me to get organized to return to Jefferson City on Monday.

Legislative session results in long days. It is not uncommon for me to go to the capitol at 7:30 a.m. and not get back to my apartment until 10:00 p.m. (or later). Most legislators try to get all their legislative work (including constituent letters, phone calls and e-mails and bill drafting) completed (or at least under control) from Monday through Thursday. Since our families do not travel with us, most of us prefer to work long days in Jefferson City so we can focus on our jobs and family when we are home.

In addition to appropriations meetings starting, our other committees have also been meeting. I serve on the Commerce Committee which hears energy and telecommunications related bills. We heard a very controversial bill this week that would allow your local phone companies to compete with cable companies for delivery of television services. Last year, we heard a bill that allowed cable companies to compete with phone companies for the delivery of telephone services. Guess what? Last year the cable companies thought it was a good idea for them to be able to compete for phone service and the phone companies thought it was a bad idea. Now this year, the tables are turned and the cable companies think competition for video services from the phone companies is a bad idea and the phone companies thinks it’s a great idea! And I’m the one who has to sort out the mess (along with other Senators). All of this will impact high speed internet services as well.

My general rule is that competition is a good thing for the consumer. I’m inclined to work toward anything that supports competition so long as the field is fair – not artificially giving an unfair advantage to either player. We haven’t voted on the bill (SB 816) yet but I hope the bill will pass out of committee so that we can continue to hammer out a way for you as consumers to have more choices for delivery of all your telecommunications services.

Governor Matt Blunt has delivered his State of the State Address. This sound like a big deal but all it really is, is the Governor’s formal outline of what he hopes will be spending and legislative priorities for Missouri in 2006.

There is good news for Missouri after some years of financial trouble. This past year, Missouri gained more than 28,000 new jobs while at the same time unemployment fell to its lowest level in four years. Missouri exports through the 3rd quarter of 2005 are more than \$800 million ahead of the record \$9 billion in global sales set in 2004. This is good news because it means business is booming in Missouri – which means our jobs are more secure. It also helps us live up to our obligation to fund our schools as planned according to new legislation passed last year. Governor Blunt confirmed that this is a priority of his (and it is a priority of mine as well).

We plan to add another \$167 million to schools – which not only fulfills our promise and priority, but breaks the pattern of brutal withholdings from schools from the previous Governor. Under our plan, Missouri is now spending more money than ever in the history of the state on elementary and secondary education.

Governor Blunt also outlined a lot of other spending plans. The only cautionary word I have to say about this is: No government ever spent itself into prosperity. We have to be careful that all the pain we went through last year in revamping our budget, does not get wasted this year on over-generous spending.

We must stay focused on what government can and should do: provide education, build roads and bridges, provide public safety, keep criminals behind bars, provide the means to protect those people who cannot provide for themselves and fund our “rainy day fund” to protect our normal budget spending from the effects of facing emergencies and disasters.

Right now, we are off to a good start. Governor Blunt gave a good speech and the House and Senate are enjoying a good working relationship. We are poised to keep Missouri moving so long as we stay focused on proper priorities.

I hope you will stay in touch regarding this article or any other topic of concern to you.

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