

Opening Address

Senator Michael R. Gibbons, President Pro Tem

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Lt. Gov. Kinder, members of the Missouri Senate, people of Missouri:

As the dawn breaks on the opening of this session, the 112th in our history, we can see a new foundation for the 21st century beginning to take shape. More Missourians are at work, businesses are choosing Missouri as a place to grow and invest over other states, even other countries. Our children have a better chance at a great education, and we are safer. The future looks bright for the people of Missouri, but it is up to us to finish the hard work of building this new foundation, and to do it well.

2005 was an historic session. From schools, to work, to a day in court – Missourians are seeing changes that make our lives better. Last year, we dedicated more money than ever to our children’s education to be distributed by a new formula based upon students’ needs rather than local wealth. In a difficult environment, we found the right balance so that all of our children, no matter where they live, can have an equal opportunity for a world class education.

The new foundation we’re building also made Missouri a safer place for us to live and raise children. For example, we made it more difficult for meth

producers to get the ingredients they need to concoct their dangerous drug, and already have cut production in half. And we will not rest until this evil is eliminated. We created new tools to combat underage drinking by increasing and adding penalties to include minors who are drunk, not just in possession. We protected our children at the homes of others by holding parents responsible for allowing house parties with alcohol. And, we cracked down on repeat drunk driving offenders by creating a new crime making the prison sentence more than four times longer for drunk drivers who kill.

It has also been a year that's seen more jobs for the people of our state. Unemployment in Missouri is back down to where it was before the world changed on Sept 11, 2001. More than 38,000 new jobs have been created this past year, including at least 1,100 in manufacturing and 1,000 in construction. In fact, 60 of the manufacturing jobs were created right across the river at the manufacturing firm of ABB; what's exciting is that they chose to close a plant in Canada to expand their operations here, in Missouri.

A key indication of our economic improvement is the growth in the state's general revenue which is growing at a rate nearly double what was hoped for last spring. While we're not out of the woods yet, this improving economy means we're getting closer to a balanced budget that will allow us to maintain programs while we continue substantial reforms, so that we can provide the services Missourians need, and deserve, without a tax increase.

Workers' compensation rates are coming down. The state's largest carrier, Missouri Employee Mutual Insurance Company, has announced a five percent decrease in premiums effective this month.

So what does this mean for the average Missourian? It means small businesses like Hellebusch Tool and Die, a manufacturing company in Washington, Missouri, have decided to add new jobs this year. The president of Hellebusch, Wally Hellebusch, says the changes we made in the workers' compensation laws allowed his company to expand.

Moreover, in neighboring St. Louis County, the Chrysler Group has committed at least one billion dollars in new investment in its plants and equipment bringing 21st century manufacturing to their operations in Fenton. Their cutting edge technology will allow trucks, vans, and cars to be built on the same line, at the same time, based upon demand, without the need to retool, making Chrysler in Fenton a global leader in this technology. This massive investment ensures the two plants' futures and the jobs of thousands of highly skilled, well paid Missouri workers.

The Quality Jobs Act from last year has played a major role in this breathtaking news as have the reforms to our workers' compensation law and our civil justice system. For small businesses like Hellebusch Tool and Die to giant multi-national corporations like Chrysler, it is clear Missouri's economy is on the move. And with that, more people are working at good jobs. The essential hope in the American Dream is that tomorrow will be better and that

our dreams can be achieved. This exciting economic news shows that this hope is grounded in reality, that the people are building on a firmer foundation, our tomorrows are looking better and our dreams can come true.

Change is constant. As we reform our government to make it work for the people in this modern age, the Missouri Senate is undergoing great change as well. At the start of last year, two members moved on to other positions. In July, we lost our friend and colleague to cancer, Senator Larry Gene Taylor, and Senator Jon Dolan resigned in November to pursue other opportunities.

The election to replace Sen. Dolan in April will make our fourth special election in twelve months, which is unprecedented. This change; however, has brought us good, new members, the latest being Senator Jack Goodman, R-Mt. Vernon, who was elected in November. Senator from Lawrence, you are joining an outstanding group of leaders. We are glad you are with us, and expect many good things from you for the benefit of the people of Missouri.

Let us welcome the Senator from Lawrence.

This year will mark the end, due to term limits, of the Senate careers of the three members that were elected in the historic special election on January 24, 2001, the election that changed control of the Senate for the first time in more than fifty years and ultimately led to a change in control of state government. We look forward to working with Senators David Klindt, R-Bethany; John Cauthorn, R-Mexico; and Pat Dougherty, D-St. Louis; in this, their final session.

We also applaud and thank you for the dedication and service you have given to the people of Missouri.

Amidst all of this change at least two things will remain the same; the commitment to excellence and service by our great Senate employees, and our commitment to the civility, character and reputation of the Missouri Senate.

I would like to thank our Minority Floor Leader, Senator Maida Coleman, D-St. Louis, and many others who have worked with me to protect the Senate's tradition; that is, a place where the great issues of the day can be debated openly and vigorously, changes proposed, votes taken, and positions decided, so that we can best act in accordance with the welfare of the people. However, this is an election year, so we must each work extra hard to have the clash of ideas essential to a robust democracy without the personal attacks or rabid partisanship that is so destructive to our quest; that is, to do what is right, to the best of our ability, for the people of this great state. This goal will not be easy to achieve as we continue to debate the great and difficult issues of our time.

Chief among these is our continued effort to reform our healthcare system in Missouri. The Medicaid Reform Commission recently issued its report. It is a remarkable document and should be read carefully by every member. It is available on the Senate website and we invite every Missourian to read the commission's goals for a new healthcare system. Of particular note are some

lofty objectives: that all the people of Missouri should have available, affordable healthcare; and that the central focus of healthcare should change to keeping people healthy and preventing illness rather than ONLY treating them when they are sick.

Moreover, an emphasis must be made on technology. Looking at the Hurricane Katrina disaster, consider a family who packed their car with all the belongings they could cram in and escaped to Houston. Whatever was not in their car was destroyed. Yet, if their car was serviced by Jiffy Lube in New Orleans, they could go to one in Houston and know exactly when they last changed the oil, the wipers, and rotated the tires. But they can't even begin to find out when they last had a tetanus shot; those paper records are gone. In the 21st century, this is unacceptable. The Institute of Medicine says between 44,000 and 98,000 people each year die because of errors in paper medical records. This is an outrage. Going to electronic medical records and e-prescribing are examples of reforms we must make - they save lives, improve health and save precious tax dollars for the people who really need the help.

There will be debate on how we reach these goals, but we must reach them. We must work tirelessly to achieve a healthcare system that protects the health of all Missourians. We must also fight to expose fraud where we find it, whether it be perpetrated by caregivers, therapists, doctors, hospitals, equipment providers, pharmaceutical companies, or participants. We must seek vigorous prosecution of all those who cheat the people of Missouri and take money away

from those that are in great need. In addition to the reforms listed by the commission, we must change the law where necessary to eliminate fraud, waste and abuse. The special Senate committee on Fraud that I appointed will meet later this month, so that we can expose any fraud in the system and take action to eliminate it this session.

We must also act this year to protect the homes, farms, and businesses of the people of this state from the abuses of eminent domain and redevelopment tools like Tax Increment Financing or "TIF." I represent the area in Sunset Hills that was subject to a TIF redevelopment. The TIF commission turned the plan down. Despite that, the city of Sunset Hills approved it anyway. Time does not allow a full discussion of everything else that has happened, but suffice it to say, that in this instance, everyone lost: homeowners who wanted to sell, homeowners who wanted to stay, the businesses in the area, the city of Sunset Hills, its neighbors, everyone.

This disaster cannot be repeated. Complete disregard for the rights of property owners must not be tolerated.

The awesome power of government to take someone's property with just compensation is, at times, necessary to provide for a truly public use and benefit. But, the taxpayer subsidized financial success of one property owner at the expense of another is not a public benefit that allows the government to take someone's home. The property owners of Missouri deserve better. NOW is the time to act. The excess must end.

Our most precious gift in this state, our children, deserve our attention again this year. Their education is the foundation for a bright future, and to that end, we must fully fund the next installment of the new school funding formula. This formula, based on student need, rather than local wealth, is our best effort to make sure that all children in Missouri have a chance to receive a great education so they are prepared for the challenges ahead.

We must also do a better job of protecting the safety of our children. Any sexual predator who might consider harming one of them must know, that the punishment will be swift, certain, and severe. Or to put it another way, we are going to lock the door and throw away the key. Our children deserve it.

They also deserve a child safe Internet, where they can explore the wonders it offers without the threat of being confronted with shocking images, pornography, or predators attempting to lure them into harmful situations. At a minimum, we must match Federal prison sentences for luring a minor over the Internet as well as expand the search warrant powers over Internet service providers so we can do a better job of prosecuting the vermin that would seduce our kids.

We must also do a more effective job with mandatory background checks for all employees that work with children and ensure a consequence for those employers who fail to make this modest effort. Missouri will be a leader in protecting her children.

And finally, energy is the beating heart of our modern life, and if we expect the people of Missouri to have opportunities in the future, a clean, plentiful supply of energy is essential. We must immediately help our seniors, disabled and low-income Missourians with their high heating bills this winter, but we must also pursue a path to energy abundance and independence.

As we work on the foundation of our future, it is critical that we have an energy plan and begin taking action on it today. Reforming and modernizing our government, economy, education, and healthcare are important to how well we live in the future. Our ability to solve our energy crisis is critical to our survival. As more people use more energy, prices increase while the readily available supply decreases. Ten years ago, people never thought that natural gas would cost more than four dollars per unit. This year, it sold for eight dollars a unit in Missouri and 16 dollars a unit on the east coast. We have a serious problem.

I applaud the Governor and his foresight to our energy needs by establishing the Missouri Energy Taskforce of which I am honored to be a member. We should strive to be a leader in America with an energy plan that utilizes our Agricultural strengths to pursue renewable fuels, cleaner burning technologies, and aggressively pursue hydrogen as a primary fuel source, so that we can be energy independent, and protect the environment. We will be prepared to take the work of this taskforce and transfer it into an energy action plan for the future. Our children and our grandchildren need us to do this for them.

Anyone who has ever built a home knows that the most critical step is building a solid foundation. If it is done well, the home that is constructed will be safe, secure and provide great comfort to many generations. We have all been elected to serve at a time of great change that offers wonderful opportunities for the future, but also holds great risks. In the history of mankind, there has never been a period of change that was as fast, or as sweeping, or as intense as today. State government has not kept up, so many things that we do today are ineffective, outdated, or obsolete. We have proven that we can find common sense solutions to complex problems. But, we have no time to waste as we continue building a strong foundation for the 21st century.

This year's effort must include reforms to begin to make healthcare available and affordable to all; to protect our rights in our homes, farms, and businesses; to safeguard our children; and to establish an energy action plan. Together with the foundational work from last year, these changes will put Missouri on a strong footing for decades to come. We have the know-how, the right tools, and strong leaders in this Missouri Senate. So, let's work together. Our children and grandchildren are counting on us. The time to act is now. And, we must succeed.