



SENATOR MATT BARTLE

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Lawmakers Enter Spring Recess after Positive First Half

With adjournment for a weeklong spring recess, lawmakers have reached the unofficial midway point of the 2007 legislative session. The past several months have been hard work, but the Senate has made some progress on a number of important issues while several others remain in legislative limbo.

Senators recently took up a plan to sell student loans from the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority (MOHELA) to build facilities at select Missouri colleges and universities. After extensive debate, including a filibuster in the Senate last Monday that lasted all night, the Senate has set the bill aside, unable to reach resolution on the issue. Many concerns have been raised, including whether the proposal would jeopardize student loan rates and whether the priorities under MOHELA truly reflect the priorities of Missouri voters.

Likewise, the Senate has so far stopped an attempt to remove the loss limits placed on casinos. When Missourians voted to allow riverboat gambling in 1992, they did so with the agreement that a \$500 loss limit would be enforced and that gambling in Missouri would be subject to tight regulations. One by one, these promises have been stretched or broken. One of the last remaining commitments to Missourians is the \$500 loss limit. This is a safeguard barring gamblers from losing more than \$500 within a two-hour period and to keep problem gamblers from ruining their lives due to an addictive and destructive game. Legislation currently before the Senate would repeal the limit; however, the bill has been held up due to strong opposition from senators who intend to hold the gambling industry to their word.

The legislature has also taken up, passed and sent to the governor a bill that would give Missourians more choices in their selection of cable providers. The bill makes it easier for telecommunications companies to enter the cable industry and give cable companies fair, healthy competition. The bill will promote competition in an industry that for too long has lacked the important disciplining effects of the free market. I hope this legislation will lead to lower prices and improved services.

With the first half of the session behind us, senators are now looking forward to taking up the state budget. The budget, comprised of House Bills 1 through 13, determines how Missouri will spend more \$20 billion in fiscal year 2008. Important parts of the budget include the funding for the new MO HealthNet, which replaces Medicaid and emphasizes a healthy lifestyle over more costly emergency care. There are also tax cuts to improve access to health care for small businesses and remove double-dipping on Social Security benefits. In addition, the budget invests in math and science education to prepare our young people for the world's evolving economy.

We have deliberated on many important issues during the first half of the session, and the pace will quicken during the next few weeks ahead of our date for adjournment in mid-May. Traditionally, most of the major pieces of legislation are not passed until late in the session, after both the House and Senate have had a chance to deliberate on them. I look forward to the coming weeks and the opportunity to refine and discuss the important issues that have yet to come before the Senate.

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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