



MISSOURI SENATE

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**A Column for the Week
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Starting the Budget

JEFFERSON CITY — We're a couple of months away from the start of the next legislative session, but work has already begun on the legislature's one constitutional requirement: put together a state budget. The process has actually been underway long before the 2007 legislative session was over as we tried to take a long-term approach to spending YOUR money on YOUR priorities. The good news is the estimates we used for the most recent budget are proving true, so the money we put aside for schools, healthcare, and taking care of those who need a little help will be available. However, the next budget could be a bit tighter, so fiscal control will be a theme in the coming year.

First off, state revenues continue to grow. The September 2007 numbers show that, for the Fiscal Year 2008 year-to-date, general revenues have grown by about 3.8 percent. That means our economy is strong, and it will support the priorities we placed in the Fiscal Year 2008 budget (which began on July 1st of this year).

There are some concerns, however, that the economy could be slowing down and what that will mean for next year's budget. Real concerns over the national housing market and the recent meltdown in some sub-prime lending rates have some jittery about what we will have to work with in the coming session. But I think we've done some things in the past few years that have given our economy a real base, and we'll be able to weather the coming storm.

Missouri's Department of Economic Development has been working hard to make sure that this state is able to rise above any national problems. In the last couple of years, we have changed our attitude to make Missouri a business-friendly environment so employers and entrepreneurs are encouraged to create good jobs that support families. Violent storms, severe drought, and even high fuel prices have failed to derail the economic gains we have made. Since January 2005, Missouri has created more than 96,000 new jobs. During that same time, our Quality Jobs Act has helped secure the creation of 17,000 new jobs that pay above the average

county wage and provide healthcare benefits. That's why it received so much attention, and more importantly, more money when we came back in for a special session in August. In addition, we scrapped the old Medicaid system to the pro-active MO HealthNet system. Other reforms include our worker's compensation system. Companies around the country know Missouri is open for business.

As the new chair of the Senate Education Committee, I am particularly interested in the Lewis and Clark Discovery Initiative, which will put more that \$335 million in much-needed infrastructure improvements in colleges and universities across the state. Students will also be able to afford to go to these schools as we've doubled the amount of state money spent on need-based scholarships. Furthermore, over the past three years, nearly a half-billion dollars more in Foundation Formula money has been put into our public schools to give those kids the basis they will need for those higher educations.

As you can see, we've done what is necessary to improve this state's economy so that our budget situation remains strong. Meanwhile, I'll continue to keep listening and talking with you to make sure that YOUR money will be spent on YOUR priorities.

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Senator Robert Mayer represents the people of Wayne, Ripley, Butler, Stoddard, New Madrid, Pemiscot and Dunklin counties in the Missouri Senate.