



Charting the Course For Lincoln County's Growth

JEFFERSON CITY — Lincoln County is the second fastest growing area of our state. Its population has grown by 23 percent since the 2000 census, with the latest official estimate of 2006 at 50,123 residents. This swift growth has brought about some unique county- and court-related issues that I am currently working on to provide Lincoln County with the tools it needs to appropriately plan for the future.

Currently, Lincoln County is designated as a 3rd class county. Missouri counties are classified into three groups based upon their assessed valuation, with 1st class counties having the highest total property values. In essence: the larger the assessed valuation, the higher the county class designation, the greater the tax revenues— and the greater demand and requirement for services.

Lincoln County's most recent assessment is \$558.3 million and it will be able to go to 1st class status by next assessment. However, they have not been able to go to 2nd class status due to a quirk in the law that has put them in a holding pattern of classification. The concern held by the commissioners is that it would be a huge detriment to Lincoln County residents to go from 3rd to 1st classification, and they need to go to 2nd class status since their valuation has grown.

After many conversations with the commissioners and county clerk, and reviewing this situation with the State Tax Commission, it became clear that the only way to allow Lincoln county to go to a 2nd class county status would be by special legislation on the state level to grant the elected commissioners to vote on this issue. My Senate Bill 820, which received unanimous committee approval and is expected to have Senate floor debate this week, will allow growing counties like Lincoln County to walk — not run — into the 1st class county designation. Accelerating into a 1st class designation would require a substantial increase in facilities, staff and services and would have a harmful impact on Lincoln County and potentially other counties. We have all seen the projections on the growth in this area of the state, and we need to make sure that we plan accordingly. Providing Lincoln Counties elected local leaders the tools to govern the county the most effectively is what I have been working on this week in the Senate.

Another major consideration for Lincoln County is my second effort to create an additional judge position for the 45th Circuit, which includes Lincoln and Pike counties. More than 66,000 people are currently being served by just one presiding judge — pushing the judicial system to the max. Adding a judge will ease the circuit court's burden, which has experienced a rise in filings of nearly a third since 2000, including a 51 percent increase in felony filings. Senate Bill 769, under consideration by the Senate Judiciary and Civil And Criminal Jurisprudence Committee, addresses this dilemma and will provide a permanent solution to the problem.

I look forward to working on these and other important issues that affect Lincoln County. By carefully planning for, and providing for, the anticipated changes that come with being a desirable place to live, we will be better prepared to serve the people who call Lincoln County home.

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 phone at (866) 271-2844.

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