



State Budget Heading Into Decisive Hours

JEFFERSON CITY — Recently, I was privileged and honored to be chosen by Senate leader Mike Gibbons (R-Kirkwood) to serve on the General Assembly’s appropriations conference committee. Four of my Senate colleagues and I, along with five representatives from the House, were selected to negotiate budget allocations on behalf of our respective bodies and to determine how the proposed \$22.6 billion budget will fund the critical functions of state government to benefit Missouri citizens. Once completed, the conference committee’s budget proposals head to the Senate and House chambers for debate, and following further deliberation, must be approved by the May 9 deadline and sent to the governor’s desk.

Elected to the Missouri Senate just two years ago, I was very pleased to be asked to serve on this high-ranking committee and will do my best to ensure that your tax dollars are allocated fairly. Already a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I worked closely with the Senate’s proposed budget, which includes a \$121.3 million increase to fully fund the state’s school Foundation Formula (a 22.05 percent increase since 2005 without a tax increase), a \$2.2 million increase dedicated to the Serving Our Veterans Program for mental health services to family members of veterans and transitional housing assistance for homeless veterans, and \$340 million for a proposed healthcare program.

As you know, education is a top priority of mine. Already, the conference committee has made its recommendation to fully fund the Foundation Formula distribution to schools and proposes \$95.8 million for the Access Missouri Scholarship Program — a program that provides annual scholarships for Missouri students to attend public or private colleges or universities. I am also extremely pleased that we agreed to increase the higher education budget by 6 percent — the third year in a row for growth, again without raising your taxes.

In addition, the Senate budget also increases spending for several health programs, including \$7.3 million for autism services, and I fully intend to make sure Missouri families living with this growing and troubling disease receive the ample resources they need for a comprehensive, coordinated system of healthcare. I will also support proposed increases in transportation funding. As vice-chair of the Senate Transportation Committee, I will support a nearly \$500 million increase for construction from bond proceeds, including MoDOT’s plan to sell bonds generating \$75 million for the I-64 project in St. Louis.

Several of the budget bills are still under consideration, and I promise to commit my best judgment and professional ability to presenting a fair and reasonable budget for the people of Missouri.

In another matter, the Senate recently gave first-round approval to my measure (Senate Bill 865) that would limit the ability of life insurance companies to deny coverage or increase premiums based upon an individual's travel plans. Some Missourians have been denied life insurance because they planned to visit certain places that were deemed too dangerous by the U.S. State Department. There are exemptions when an insurer can prove a greater risk exists, such as an outbreak of a highly contagious disease.

Several states have passed similar measures and Missouri should, too, so that insurers don't unfairly target travelers.

With only two weeks left in this legislative session, there will be plenty of shirt sleeves rolled up and late hours logged as we work to complete this year's legislative session. Deliberative by nature, trying at times, I feel privileged to be a part of this remarkable American institution and enjoy working to represent my constituents in St. Charles and Lincoln counties.

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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