



Voice Your Support for U.S. 61 Interchange at South Lincoln Drive

JEFFERSON CITY — As vice-chair of the Senate Transportation Committee, I am keenly aware of transportation projects across the state, particularly in our own area. I was very pleased to learn the Missouri Department of Transportation has included construction of a \$13 million interchange on U.S. 61 at South Lincoln Drive near Troy as a proposed project for the northeast district as part of its five-year construction program.

U.S. 61 is a priority route for Lincoln County — one of the fastest growing counties in the state — and this much-needed improvement project would help relieve congestion and allow for better access for the tens of thousands of motorists who travel this route each day. Also included as possible projects for the Lincoln County area are improvements to two bridges — over Lost Creek and Sandy Creek, both along Route 79.

The northeast district has targeted 33 projects for 2009-2013. Public comment on these projects is currently underway through June 27, so I want to strongly urge you, particularly the residents of Lincoln County, to take the time to voice your support for the proposed interchange. Your input during the public comment phase of the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program is vital and influences project priority.

The full list of projects can be found on MoDOT's website at modot.org and comments can be submitted to customerservice3@modot.mo.gov or by calling a toll-free number at 1-888-275-6636.

Following the public review, comments will be presented to the Missouri Highways and Transportation Committee. The commission will review the comments and the final transportation program before considering it for approval June 2.

Remembering & Honoring Veterans

With the Memorial Day weekend just over, I hope you were able to participate in one of the many area tributes and events that recognized the service of our men and women of the armed forces. I also want to share with you a number of ways the state of Missouri is now honoring veterans.

As vice-chair of the Senate Veterans' Committee and a member of the Senate Education Committee, I was happy to endorse a bill that will now limit the tuition that can be charged by higher education institutions to some combat veterans. The "Missouri Returning Heroes' Education Act" limits the tuition charged to qualified combat veterans attending state public institutions for any program leading to a certificate or an associate or baccalaureate degree. A combat veteran is any person who served in armed combat after September 11, 2001, who was a Missouri resident when first entering the military, and who was discharged from military service under honorable conditions.

Other veteran-related bills I supported that were recently passed into law include requiring state and political subdivisions to favor service disabled veteran businesses when letting contracts and updating various laws relating to members of the military and their families. Among the new laws affecting our military families is a provision that exempts military dependents that have completed qualified prekindergarten or kindergarten programs in another state from meeting the Aug. 1 deadline and age requirements for entering kindergarten or first grade. The bill also allows the state board of education to develop recommendations for alternate assessments for military dependents that relocate to Missouri during the school year.

In addition, the measure allows the spouse or children of a soldier killed in action after Sept. 11, 2001, or who became 80 percent disabled as the result of an injury sustained in combat action after that date, to be eligible for educational grants for tuition at public or private colleges or universities in Missouri. The veteran must have been a Missouri resident when first entering military service — or at the time of death — in order for his or her survivors to receive the grant.

Another measure I supported during the legislative season was a bill that requires all government buildings to fly the U.S. and Missouri flags at half-staff when any Missouri resident is killed in military combat. Without hesitation, the General Assembly supported the bill, which goes into effect later this summer.

In addition, I am also pleased that we were able to provide \$2.2 million for the Serving Our Veterans Program that provides mental health services to family members of veterans and transitional housing assistance to homeless veterans.

Veterans are and always have been an important part of our state's history and framework. I hope that you will take some time to pause and remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice for freedom and to thank those who are selflessly sharing their time, talents and skills and making countless personal sacrifices to protect Missourians and all U.S. citizens from threats to our freedom and safety.

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.

###