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Sex Offender Laws and Copper Theft Hot Topics in Senate Judiciary Committee

JEFFERSON CITY — As chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, I have the opportunity to hear stories of how Missouri's law needs to be updated to address problems that arise. Two of the issues we've been covering lately that strike me as particularly important are the effort to make sex offender registry laws retroactive and Missouri's ongoing battle with copper theft.

Two identical bills heard in the committee this week relate to sex offender registry laws. By way of background, in 2004 a law was passed that required sex offenders to register with the state, regardless of the year in which the crime took place. However, in 2006 the Missouri Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional because it violated the ban on the retrospective application of laws laid out in the state constitution.

Senate Joint Resolutions 30 and 34 would add an amendment to the state constitution to allow the sex offender registry laws to be applied retrospectively. This means sex offenders who committed crimes before the registry law was enacted in 1995 would be required to be listed.

If the legislation works its way through the process and is passed by the Legislature this year as hoped, the proposal will go before the voters. I am confident the voters will agree that we need to update our law to help protect our children from sexual predators and make the sex offender registry as comprehensive as possible.

In other news, this week the Senate Judiciary approved a bill that would help prevent copper theft, which is fast becoming a serious problem in Missouri. With copper prices reaching record highs in the last few years, theft of copper from buildings, utilities and even cars is an all too common occurrence across the state.

Theft of this lucrative metal does more than cause thousands of dollars in damage and one big headache for victims – it also affects the reliability of our infrastructure. Power outages can result from this illegal activity, potentially leaving those most vulnerable to

extreme weather in the winter and summer months without heat or air conditioning. In addition, replacing the lost wires can be dangerous for utility workers who are charged with fixing the damages or are unaware that someone tampered with the wiring, putting them at risk of electric shock

To help prevent copper theft, Senate Bill 1034 would require scrap metal dealers to keep stricter records of transactions, including keeping track of sellers' driver's licenses. The legislation also ups the penalty for copper theft from a misdemeanor to a Class D felony.

If you have any 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. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.