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Budget Details Take Shape as Deadline Nears

The primary duty of the General Assembly each year is to pass a state budget. This session, May 9 is the constitutional deadline for lawmakers from both the House and Senate to agree to a budget for fiscal year 2009. Months and months of discussion and negotiation go into formulating the final budget, which this year is nearly \$23 billion. While this may seem like a lot of money, much of it is non-discretionary and comes from the federal government, meaning we must spend it in certain ways.

As elected officials, we are guardians of the public trust and responsible for making decisions about the financial future of this state. We are accountable to the voters to spend only what we are able and to make a budget that best serves the needs of Missourians. I take this responsibility very seriously and felt a duty to vote “no” on many portions of the budget based on my belief that the Legislature’s estimates of how much revenue will be coming into state coffers is as much as \$130 million off due to the weakening economy. This means that in the near future, legislators will be required to make painful cuts in the budget because we did not exercise fiscal restraint during prosperous economic times.

In spite of my concerns with the overall condition of the state’s economy, here are some of the more important parts of this year’s budget:

Providing a quality education to our children has always been critically important to Missouri. This year we provided an additional \$121.2 million increase over last year to fund the school foundation formula and a \$3.5 million increase for the A+ Schools Program. To help encourage students to move into the fields of math and science, we reserved \$1 million to support the Missouri Mathematics, Engineering, Technology and Science (METS) Initiative.

In the area of higher education, Missouri’s public two- and four-year higher education institutions will receive a \$43 million increase in funding overall. Also, students who may not be able to afford college will get extra help through the Access Missouri Financial Assistance Program, which is receiving a \$23.8 million increase in funding — bringing total funding to \$95.8 million.

Transportation, another important issue for Missourians, will receive a total \$1.7 billion, including \$75.1 million in increased funding through Amendment 3 bond proceeds for road and bridge projects across the state. We have also set aside \$30 million, including an increase of \$11.9 million, for grants aimed at reducing death, injury and property damage on state highways.

In the area of public safety, the new budget will include a quarter of a million dollars to fight the exploitation of children over the Internet. It also includes \$84,000 in special immigration and customs training for law enforcement in order to help them better respond to illegal immigration. The budget also

grants the Department of Public Safety funding to begin converting to a new communications system that will help ensure that law enforcement and first responders can communicate with one another in times of emergency or severe disaster. Recent earthquakes that have rattled parts of the Show-Me State remind us of why we must be proactive in preparing for worst-case scenarios.

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>.

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