



MISSOURI SENATE

JEFFERSON CITY

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**A Weekly Column for the
Week of Jan. 07, 2008**

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And We're Off...

JEFFERSON CITY – This week marks the beginning of another legislative session, as lawmakers came back to the state Capitol to kick off the Second Regular Session of the 94th Missouri General Assembly. The session officially began on Wednesday, January 9th and will run through May 16th, 2008. In his opening day speech, the President Pro Tem of the Missouri Senate challenged us to work hard together to better the lives of the people of Missouri, and I certainly hope that's what happens this year. Since it's an election year, though, I'm not sure how much we'll actually accomplish, but I plan to do my part to make sure we address the issues and concerns that folks have brought to me since the legislature adjourned last May.

One issue I'm already working on is expanding Internet access to rural Missouri. Last summer, the governor created the Rural High-Speed Internet Task Force to address the technical needs of Missouri's rural communities. Our task force just held a meeting in Hannibal, where we heard from farmers, business owners, economic development officials, officials from rural electric coops, and others about the need to get high-speed Internet services to rural Missouri.

It's a huge challenge, similar to the electrification of rural Missouri, which began in 1936 with the passage of the Rural Electrification Act. At this point, we don't know where we're at in Missouri regarding high-speed Internet access in rural parts of the state. Our task force will have to map the state to see where services are lacking, because you can't solve a problem if you don't know what it is. It is clear, however, that our rural kids are falling behind in educational opportunities that their city cousins enjoy and our rural businesses are at a disadvantage and are falling behind because they can't compete in today's global marketplace without the right tools.

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We're not necessarily doing this for today, but we must have a plan for tomorrow. Heck, China has more than one billion people and most of them have access to high-speed Internet. Surely a country with just 330 million people and a lot more resources can make sure all of its citizens have access to the tools they need to compete. For example, Onshore Technologies in Macon has done a tremendous job of bringing new opportunities to rural Missouri through its "Rural Outsourcing" initiative. This program provides training to rural Missourians to work in advanced technology professions. But the company won't be able to expand to rural communities without high-speed Internet access.

Our task force is looking at what other states are doing to modernize their rural infrastructure, and there may be legislative solutions like tax credits to move this effort along. The lights didn't get turned on in rural Missouri without the government's help, and the same appears to be true about high-speed Internet access.

I'd like to extend my condolences to Lt. Governor Peter Kinder, whose mother died last week. Losing a parent is one of the most difficult times in anyone's life, and I just want to express my sympathies to the Kinder family.

I'd also like to welcome my new intern, Kristin Jacobs, to our Capitol office. Kristen is majoring in justice systems at Truman State University in Kirksville, and will be a great asset to our office as we work our way through the 2008 session. As always, I invite you to stop by our Capitol office, Room 434, anytime you are in Jefferson City.

If you have any questions or comments about this or any other issue, give my Capitol office a call at (573) 751-7852, send me an email at wes.shoemyer@senate.mo.gov, or drop a line to Room 434, State Capitol, 201 West Capitol Ave., Jefferson City, MO 65101.