



MISSOURI SENATE

JEFFERSON CITY

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**A Weekly Column for the
Week of May 12, 2008**

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2008 Session Lurches to a Close

JEFFERSON CITY – The last week of the 2008 legislative session was one of the longest weeks I can remember, with the Senate working until the early morning hours three days this week. Sleep-deprived lawmakers don't always make the best decisions, but we did manage to accomplish some good things for the folks who sent us here to represent them.

For example, we finally passed a bill to repeal the so-called village law that the Speaker of the House snuck into a big local government bill last year without telling anyone. The village law basically allows wealthy landowners to create their own villages, free from the oversight of local government officials. These "villages" don't have to abide by county zoning regulations or any other rules that the rest of us follow to be good neighbors. Like I've said before, government is best when it is closest to the people, and this village law was just an end run around local governments.

Lawmakers also passed legislation cracking down on illegal immigration. The measure prohibits illegal immigrants from receiving public assistance or from enrolling in our public universities. More importantly, the bill bars employers from hiring illegal immigrants. Most of these folks come to Missouri looking for work, and some employers in Missouri are willing to exploit their illegal status in order to pay them low wages. I don't blame folks for wanting to improve their lives by coming here to earn a living, but I do blame unscrupulous employers who take advantage of them. If caught, these employers could lose their business license or state contract.

We finally passed a bill that prohibits the Missouri Department of Agriculture from participating in the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) without legislative approval.

The bill says the state may support a “voluntary” animal identification program, and I think that’s the key to this whole issue – keeping it voluntary. We don’t need or want Big Brother in Washington, D.C. telling us how to operate our farms in Missouri. The NAIS was included in the 2002 Farm Bill, when fears of possible bioterrorism loomed large. I think those fears have been overblown, but the NAIS is still with us.

The omnibus transportation bill includes an amendment I offered on utility vehicles. My father brought this issue to my attention, and one of my proudest moments this year was having Dad testify in support of my bill in committee. The bill defines the term "utility vehicle" as any motorized vehicle manufactured and used exclusively for off-highway purposes and is used primarily for agricultural, landscaping, lawn care, or maintenance purposes. Under the bill, a utility vehicle can’t be operated on the highways of this state except under certain circumstances. It prohibits folks from operating a utility vehicle within any stream or river except by an operator who owns the property or has permission to be on the property on which the waterway flows through or when fording a low-water crossing. A person operating a utility vehicle on a highway has to have a valid operator's or chauffeur's license, and the utility vehicle can’t be operated at a speed of more than 30 miles per hour on a highway. Utility vehicles are exempt from titling and registration.

Finally, we passed a property tax reform measure that should help homeowners at a time when many face foreclosure. Some county assessors in Missouri don’t roll back property tax rates when assessments go up, as required by law. This bill will put a stop to these backdoor tax increases. The bill also includes my circuit breaker amendment to provide tax relief to the most needy seniors who live in their own homes. It also removes the marriage penalty by increasing the income exemption for married claimants from \$2,000 to \$4,000 for folks who own and occupy their homes for the entire year. The maximum award under the circuit breaker tax credit program is increased from \$750 to \$1,100 for homeowners.

There’s a lot more to talk about and I will be discussing the good bills, the bad bills and the just plain silly bills in future weekly columns.

I do want to thank our intern, Kristen Jacobs, for all of her hard work this session. I hope the experience will help her when she returns to Truman State University. She’s been a real blessing for our office and I wish her all the best.

Finally, I want to thank you for sending me here to be your voice in state government. It is truly an honor and a privilege to get to work for the people of northeast Missouri.

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.