



Lawmakers Rise to Budget Challenges

JEFFERSON CITY — The Missouri state budget is completed and now waits for the governor's signature. I am very pleased to report the \$23.1 billion budget includes a \$63 million increase for the school foundation formula and sets aside the largest budget reserve in history totaling \$966 million for spending in future budget years.

State lawmakers knew crafting this year's budget wasn't going to be easy with a tough economy and state revenues in decline. Budget decisions — always an intricate process — was further complicated by the federal government's bailout efforts. Despite a number of obstacles and the weakened economy, our state passed a balanced, fiscally responsible budget that increases funding for education at all levels — without a tax increase — and protects taxpayers with a nearly \$1 billion reserve. In addition, this is the fourth year in a row Missouri has increased funding for higher education — further support of our state's commitment to making education our number one priority.

The budget also allows for funding for a new program still under consideration by the Legislature as of this writing: the Show-Me Health Coverage created in [Senate Bill 306](#) that expands health benefits to working parents. The plan, which would cover 35,000 Missourians, would pay for the premiums for health insurance for working parents who earn up to 50 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$11,025 for a family of four. The proposed expansion relies on a new federal drawdown on existing tax dollars that currently pay hospitals for uninsured care and ultimately could help 200,000 — or almost one of every three uninsured Missourians — receive coverage. This is another example of fiscal conservative budgeting to expand health coverage with no new strains on taxpayers by using existing money in a more efficient way.

As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Oversight of the Federal Stimulus Plan, I was closely involved in the budgeting process, including management of the federal stabilization dollars coming to Missouri. Despite my displeasure with the federal government's philosophy of spending our nation's way out of debt, I worked to ensure that these one-time funds were directed at creating more jobs and enhancing our state's infrastructure — not for creating new programs or services that our state cannot support. In addition, we pushed back numerous attempts to spend every stimulus dollar that came to Missouri, instead opting to bank \$1 billion to protect taxpayers in next year's budget.

It was a challenging budget year unlike any other I've seen in the General Assembly. Fortunately, through our state's conservative budget practices and planned savings in recent years, we were in a better position than most states to weather this economic crisis. A glance at the neighboring legislatures in Illinois and Kansas should help us to appreciate how our Missouri state lawmakers have worked diligently to balance revenue with expenditures while attempting to adequately fund the critical functions of the state, especially in these challenging economic times.

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.

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