



State Senator

Robin Wright-Jones

District 5



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Lawmakers Gather for Governor's State of the State Address

*New Committee Appointed to Oversee
Federal Economic Stimulus Funds*

On Tuesday (1-27) this week, lawmakers gathered in a joint legislative session of the Missouri Senate and House of Representatives to hear the governor's long-awaited recommendations for developing a state budget.

The governor outlined his top priorities, which include creating jobs and helping small businesses grow. He asked that my colleagues and I pass an emergency jobs plan before the Legislature adjourns for its mid-session break in March. He also proposed a new low-interest loan program to assist small businesses in Missouri and called for a 38 percent increase in funding for job development and training programs.

He proposed more than \$250 million in reductions of general revenue spending — including the elimination of more than 1,300 state government positions — which the governor said would cut approximately \$200 million annually from the state's budget. The governor also recommended budget cuts or total eliminations of 50 state programs.

Fully funding the state's foundation formula for K-12 schools at a total cost of \$3.5 billion also topped the governor's agenda. Higher education would not face any budget cuts under the governor's plan, and would receive \$1.3 billion (the same amount allocated last year) in funding, provided the public state colleges and universities do not raise tuition.

The governor urged lawmakers to expand access to affordable health care for the uninsured and offered a plan to cover 62,000 more Missourians through federal matching dollars.

Calling on the Legislature to move Missouri's agriculture industry forward, the governor's budget would provide full funding for ethanol and biofuels, including \$6.28 million for biodiesel incentives.

Finally, the governor pledged to balance the budget and not raise taxes, a move lauded by many lawmakers. However, some expressed concern that the governor's recommended budget relies heavily on expected funds from the federal economic stimulus package currently working its way through the U.S. Senate and House.

The [Senate Appropriations Committee](#) has already started work and will continue to meet in the coming weeks to draft its own version of a state budget plan for fiscal year 2010, taking the governor's recommendations under advisement.

Lawmakers also heard the State of Judiciary this week, where the Missouri Supreme Court chief justice urged lawmakers to find solutions to Missouri's public defender shortages. [Senate Bill 37](#), sponsored by Sen. Jack Goodman (R-Mt. Vernon), was heard this week in the [Senate General Laws Committee](#). The measure makes significant changes to the state's public defender system.

Thirteen senators were appointed to the newly created [Senate Select Committee on Oversight of Federal Stimulus Plan](#) this week. Senate Leader Charlie Shields (R-St. Joseph) formed the committee to study and strategize ways that Missouri can secure the maximum amount of the anticipated federal economic stimulus plan. The committee will help the Legislature act quickly, if necessary, to adopt and modify state laws so as not to impede the state's ability to receive a portion of the stimulus funds. The appointed senators were named to the committee for their specific knowledge and their district's relationship with the 13 primary areas of federal government and include:

- Sen. Chuck Purgason (R-Caulfield) for agriculture
- Sen. Eric Schmitt (R-Glendale) for commerce
- Sen. David Pearce (R-Warrensburg) for defense
- Sen. Kurt Schaefer (R-Columbia) for education

- Sen. Luann Ridgeway (R-Smithville) for energy
- Sen. Tom Dempsey (R-St. Charles) for health
- Sen. Rita Heard Days (D-St. Louis) for housing and urban development
- Sen. Scott T. Rupp (R-Wentzville) for the interior (conservation and natural resources)
- Sen. Jack Goodman for justice
- Sen. Victor Callahan (D-Independence) for labor
- Sen. Jolie Justus (D-Kansas City) for science
- Sen. Bill Stouffer (R-Napton) for transportation
- Sen. Jason Crowell (R-Cape Girardeau) for veterans' affairs

In other news this week, senators voted 32-1 to pass [House Concurrent Resolution 5](#), which turns down pay-raise recommendations made by the [Missouri Citizens' Commission on Compensation for Elected Officials](#). The commission recommended a \$1,500 annual pay raise to each of the state's associate judges and a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for judges, legislators and elected officials *only if* the General Assembly were to approve the same COLA for state employees. State law requires a two-thirds majority vote in both the Missouri Senate and the House in order to overturn the committee's recommendations. With the House voting 129-31 on Monday to stop the raise plan, the majority was met. Without legislative action, the law would have went into effect February 1.

Also, committee work began as the first bills were heard in their respective committees. Discussed in the [Senate Financial and Governmental Organizations and Elections Committee](#) was [Senate Bill 1](#), sponsored by Sen. Delbert Scott (R-Lowry City). The bill establishes licensing and contract requirements for pre-need funeral contract sellers, providers and seller agents.

Legislation sponsored by Sen. Rita Heard Days, [Senate Bill 55](#), was heard in the [Senate Education Committee](#). The bill allows school districts to maintain permanent electronic records.

The Missouri Senate will reconvene at 4 p.m. Monday, February 2, 2009. The First Regular Session of the 95th Missouri General Assembly will run through Friday, May 15, 2009.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please feel free to contact my office at (573) 751-2606.

*Senator Robin Wright-Jones represents a portion of
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