



Senator Matt Bartle – Serving Jackson County

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Bringing Reform to Missouri's Economic Development Program

An interesting thing happened in Jefferson City this week. Debate on a so-called “jobs” bill sparked a long overdue discussion on how the state Legislature spends the people’s money to try to stimulate the economy. For some time now, I have been arguing that the way our government hands out tax incentives is deeply biased towards certain pet industries that have the means to hire skillful lobbyists to make their case to policymakers. The result has often been that the Legislature “robs Peter to pay Paul” by giving certain groups or companies expensive tax breaks, but leaving others to pay the bill.

This week, after an hour or so of debate, the bill was temporarily withdrawn because of strong resistance by a group of senators who are committed to bringing about real reform before we let the legislation proceed to a vote.

Here’s the crux of the issue. There are too many people in Jefferson City who believe they can substitute their own judgment for the intricate workings of the free market. This is done every time we pass a bill that gives away taxpayers’ money to lure in or to keep a large corporation. Corporations are adept at this game and know that they can play legislators in Kansas against those in Missouri or Illinois and put us into a bidding war with each other to give them a sweet financial assistance package to try to get them to locate within our borders.

The other problem is that millions and millions of dollars in tax breaks are given to certain individuals and industries, but the approval of the Legislature is not even required. This has to stop. The individual getting state assistance to refurbish old buildings in

Missouri must come to the Legislature and make his case for funding alongside the family with a disabled child or the superintendent of the local school district or the Missouri State Highway Patrol. The state budget is like a pie that lawmakers must divide up each year among the hundreds of competing programs. No one should be able to bypass this process—as is currently the case.

On Thursday of this week, a Senate committee held a hearing on a bill I'm proposing to make all tax credit programs end after a set amount of time unless specifically reauthorized by the people's elected representatives in the Legislature. This is only a part of a larger package of reforms I will be pushing for.

For years we have operated under the notion that the money used to pay for tax credits is created out of thin air. The truth is, money spent on tax credits cuts into the amount of funding the state can allocate for other important services. Before we spend another nickel in tax dollars, we must have reform.

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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