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## A Broken Budget Process

Last week, we worked on the budget, 13 core spending bills as well as additional capital improvement bills that make up the state's spending plan. I serve on the Senate Appropriations Committee, which puts me in a unique position to closely observe the budget process. This year has been a very challenging year for the budget with declining revenue, increased unemployment, and new federal stimulus and stabilization dollars adding to the confusion, and unfortunately, it has also been a destructive one to the budget process. I want to take the time to explain my concerns with the budget process as it was conducted this year.

Missouri's constitution lays out several provisions dealing with the budget. This includes requiring the Legislature to complete the budget by a particular deadline, making sure Missouri's expenditures do not exceed its revenue, and requiring us to fund our public schools. The process, which follows the general pattern from bill to law, is created to allow legislators the ability to debate, discuss, and advocate for the spending priorities that they believe will make Missouri better. This process, as is often the case in the Legislature, is especially important in the Senate, where ongoing debate and extended discussion is a long-standing tradition.

This year, I feel that this tradition was violated when it was made clear on the Senate floor that amendments and extended debate were not welcome. During debate, I voiced my concerns about the cutting of important cyber crime prevention funding, cuts to agriculture, and a statewide public safety radio network that will not fairly serve local communities of the state. These concerns were all met with hostility.

In addition to these concerns, I object to state efforts to spend nearly \$3 billion in federal stimulus money to supplant general revenue dollars in the fiscal year 2010 and 2011 state budgets. The spending plans are outlined in House Bill 21 and House Bill 22. The laundry list of spending items contained in the two House bills ignores the reason the

federal government is sending this money to Missouri — to stabilize the state budget or to stimulate jobs through the creation of new or better-paying jobs. Not all of the projects are unworthy; but I believe many of them are wasteful.

It's been difficult just to get the operating budget passed this year, so I didn't see how we could possibly figure out the best way to spend close to \$3 billion in the short time we had left in the regular session, which ends on May 15<sup>th</sup>. I would have preferred to take a hard look at this over the summer and coming back in September and to pass something that really helps grow our economy by really putting people back to work.

If we would have committed this money as it was intended, we could put thousands of Missourians back to work and stimulate our economy. On the other hand, I have real concerns about the way the federal government is handing out billions of dollars. That bill will come due someday, and I fear our children and grandchildren will have to pay the tab.

All of the rules on how to spend the money allocated in HB 21 and HB 22 have not been written, so lawmakers were asked to appropriate money without knowing how that money would be spent. I'm also concerned about the fact the bills have been rewritten a number of times, and special interest groups have played too large a role in crafting the bills. I think we needed to spend a lot more time discussing these issues before we made rash decisions that will hurt us in the long run.

Much of the obstructive attitude that prevailed in the Senate originated from undue influence from the House of Representatives. I don't think people really had a chance to offer their input on these bills when they were in committee, but you can tell by reading them that the special interest groups that roam the hallways had a hand in writing these bills. Rather than spending the federal stimulus dollars on brick- and-mortar projects that would create jobs and help struggling Missouri families, House budget writers have used the federal money to offset state spending on routine, annual expenses incurred by state agencies.

As myself and fellow members worked to mold the bill on the Senate floor into legislation that we felt was more reflective of the needs of the state and our constituents, we were met with little cooperation. I can not understand how fair and open debate can be possible or how your tax dollars are being spent in a prudent manner if our ability to amend legislation is stopped. I was openly frustrated that leadership in the Senate allowed this sort of influence. Despite my reservations, the Senate approved HB 21 and HB 22; HB 21 utilizes \$2.4 billion in federal stimulus funding and HB 22, which is a two year bill, uses \$348.3 million in federal budget stabilization funding in FY 10 and \$33 million in federal budget stabilization funding in FY 11.

Creating a balanced budget that best uses Missouri taxpayer dollars is my top priority. I truly believe that the budget process was originally crafted in a way to allow this and breaking with the tradition that has historically prevailed in the upper chamber resulted

in a budget that does not truly represent the needs of the entire state. Instead of fiscal responsibility and accountability to the taxpayer, the needs of special interests ruled the process. It is my hope that in the final days of session, this uncooperative attitude will not continue and hinder the passage of meaningful legislation to improve our state.

### **Contact Me**

As always, I appreciate hearing your comments, opinions and concerns. Please feel free to call me in Jefferson City at (573) 751-2108. You can also write to the address listed below.

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