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Senator Luann Ridgeway – Serving Clay County

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[Legislative Session Begins](#)

Here it is the beginning of the year, and also the beginning of a new legislative session. I am again honored to have the privilege of representing you in the State Senate here in Missouri. Thank you for the trust you have placed in me.

Session officially started a few weeks ago. It has been a slow starting session, but activity started picking up last week.

From now until mid-May, legislators like myself travel to Jefferson City for session on Monday and usually return home on Thursday. My home is in Smithville so I'll be putting a lot of miles on my truck over the next few months. Our work as your elected representatives continues year-round. When not in session, we continue work from our district.

Friday and Saturday are often spent attending various meetings in the district. On a recent Friday, I had the pleasure of attending a luncheon where various economic development and business leaders had an information exchange with several area state legislators. I was the only State Senator in attendance, but was joined by Clay County State Representatives Doug Ervin, Bob Nance and Tim Flook.

As I stated earlier, session is getting off to a slow start this year. Senate Committees are just now starting to meet.

There were two big events this past week that I want you to know about.

First, Missouri Legislators turned down legislative pay increases. The Missouri Salary

Commission recommended that the annual pay for State Representatives and Senators be increased from \$31,351 to \$35,915. The Senate Accounting Office informs me that legislators have not had a pay increase since 2000. While the recommended increase is not enormous, to take any increase this year would certainly send the wrong message to everyone in the state. The economy is down and we may have to tighten our state budget. I didn't run for office for the money so I voted to reject the pay increase. Therefore, no legislator, including myself, will receive a pay increase. This money can be better spent this year on basic budget priorities.

Some of you may be surprised that state legislators make \$31,351. When speaking to some groups, I have become aware that some folks confuse our salary with what our U.S. Congressional members make for serving us in Washington D.C. Just so you know, federal representatives in D.C. make an annual salary of \$174,000. Nancy Pelosi as Speaker of the U.S. House, makes \$223,500 annually and flies around on a taxpayer funded private jet. Your state legislators making around \$30,000 per year must balance your state budget and do so each year. However, the majority of our representatives serving in Washington D.C. have been spending our tax dollars like crazy and our nation is massively in debt. I'll leave it to you to make your own editorial comments at this point.

The other big event of this past week concerned the Governor's State of the State Address. This speech kicked off discussions about our state budget, spending priorities and the possible use of the "Federal Stimulus Package" money (read "Bailout Boon-doggie") by our state government to help us get through the economic downturn.

Let's start out with the good news: The Governor stated that he was flatly opposed to raising taxes. On this, we are in total agreement. In fact, I believe we should be looking at ways to decrease taxes here in Missouri. The best thing government can do to put more money in the hands of Missourians is to stop taking so much from them in taxes.

On the "less than good news" front, I found it impossible to get agreement from the Governor's spokesperson concerning prudent use of any money that Missouri might take from the bailout. I've been appointed to a Senate Special Committee to investigate the federal bailout package. We are supposed to find out what money is available in the package. This is a moving target because the federal bill changes daily, if not hourly. Our committee is also supposed to find out how Missouri could use the money, assuming we decide to take any. To read part of the exchange between me and the Governor's spokesperson, go to: <http://www.missourinet.com/gestalt/go.cfm?objectid=20486BAB-5056-B82A-37C241DD626C2742>

As I also stated in the committee, the best thing the federal government could do to "bail-out" the average working taxpayer is to lower our federal taxes. But I don't think Satan's residence has frozen over yet so I doubt this will happen.

It is imperative that any federal money Missouri takes be used only for one-time, non-recurring expenses. I had hoped that we could get the Governor's agreement on this, but this was not the case. The spokesman he sent to testify before our committee would not agree to only use the money for one-time expenses. Neither would he agree that the money should not be used to expand welfare.

I'm advocating that, if Missouri takes any bailout money, that it be used only for one or

more of the following purposes:

1) Pay off bond debt Missouri incurred in 2003. The first thing most Missouri families do when they receive a large sum of one-time money, is pay off their house. As a state, we need to make sure we keep our financial house in order by clearing bonded debt off the books;

2) Accelerate implementation of tax cuts enacted in 2007. We have started the process of eliminating income taxation on social security, military veterans, railroaders, teachers and other retirement income. We could help our seniors most by accelerating the timetable for fully exempting their retirement checks from Missouri taxation;

3) Road repair and construction. The money could be used for a one-time injection of funds to further spur improvements with roads and bridges;

4) One-time grants for the developmentally disabled. We have had a waiting list of people needing services that has never been adequately addressed. The people on the list are mentally retarded or have Down's syndrome or suffer from some other significant developmental disability. For too long, they have languished on waiting lists needing care and could greatly benefit from a one-time injection of funds to address their needs, without expanding any entitlement programs.

We simply must stop any attempt to use one-time money to expand programs that will require us to spend more and more with each passing year. We can't afford it. To sustain the programs after we exhaust the bailout money would require Missouri's economy to grow by 7.4% per year. However, our average historical growth has been at 4%. We can't allow Missouri to be put in this kind of financial box.

Lastly, I was pleased this past week that my bill to outlaw a device known as the "Alcohol Without Liquid" (AWOL) was the first bill to receive a hearing in the Senate General Laws Committee. Due to bad weather, witnesses in support could not attend. However, students from all over Clay County were in the Capitol the following day visiting personally with legislators in support of the bill. Frankly I wouldn't have known about this horrible and deadly device had the students not brought it to my attention and suggested I work to ban it. The students are all members of the Youth With Vision team and represented various high schools, including Smithville, Oak Park, Staley, Kearney and others.

As always, you can reach me at luann.ridgeway@senate.mo.gov or by calling my office at 573-751-2547. I hope you will let me know your comments on this report, or any other issue of importance to you.

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