

Week of December 28, 2009



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Legislative Session Begins January 6

With the 2010 legislative session just days away, my colleagues and I in the Missouri General Assembly are busy preparing for another year in Jefferson City. We convene at noon on Wednesday, Jan. 6, for what promises to be a challenging session, mainly due to the state budget.

As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I have already seen first-hand the difficult choices that will be required of us when we put together a budget for fiscal year 2011. The budget will likely be the top issue next year as we try to reconcile paying for programs and services Missourians need versus spending within our means.

We've heard many things about the economy in the last few months, and unfortunately, because of its nature, the news is always changing. We've heard that the recession is over and we've heard that the worst is yet to come. While the truth is that nobody knows exactly when the nation will recover, here in Missouri we know that we are in better shape than many other states and it will stay that way if we continue to be fiscally responsible. That doesn't mean, however, that we won't meet any challenges. We face a potential \$1 billion in total general revenue decline for fiscal years 2009 and 2010 compared with what was collected in FY 2008. This leaves us with the very real possibility that deep cuts are on the horizon, and as painful as they may be, our state will be the better for it in the years to come than if we raise taxes to meet the shortfall.

Education will again be a top priority of mine in the coming legislative session. As the new chairman of the Senate Education Committee, I expect to tackle tough issues concerning all levels of education and job training in our state. While Missouri has some excellent schools and teachers, we still have a long way to go in terms of making our state a leader in education. In the Senate 2020 Educated Citizenry Committee, we have been

working throughout the interim on a plan to achieve our long-term education goals. It will take a firm commitment to a common vision, but I'm confident that by the time the committee presents its plan to the entire General Assembly at the end of 2010, we will have a solid foundation to build upon as we prepare our citizens to succeed in a global marketplace.

In addition to the budget and education, there are several legislative issues that are sure to be discussed in the Capitol next year, including:

- Ethics-based legislation. Several bills have been prefiled to strengthen the ethical standards in the Legislature. Some of the issues sure to be discussed include limiting political contributions, gifts from lobbyists and the role of political consultants.
- Tax credits. This was a big issue last session, too, and we certainly haven't heard the last of it heading into 2010. While we did pass legislation in 2009 that added more transparency to the tax credit process, some lawmakers are determined to pass legislation that would require a mandatory review and sunset of many of the state's tax credit programs.
- Health care coverage for autism. A bill has been prefiled (similar to a bill that passed in the Senate but did not pass in the House last year) that would require health carriers to provide coverage for the treatment and diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders. The bill would also prohibit health carriers from denying or refusing to issue coverage on an individual or dependent solely because the individual is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder.

The next few months will likely be challenging and filled with lively debate as lawmakers try to tackle a budget crisis and still pass meaningful legislation that will help improve Missourians' quality of life. As your eyes and ears in Jefferson City, I will continue to inform you about what is happening in your State Capitol during the legislative session.

As always, please feel free to contact me or my staff with any questions or concerns at any time. We look forward to hearing your comments and suggestions and trying to answer any questions you may have. You can reach us by phone at 866-277-0882 (toll-free) or 573-751-2272, or by fax at 573-526-7381.

Senator David Pearce serves Bates, Cass, Johnson and Vernon counties in the 31st State Senatorial District.

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