

OPENING ADDRESS
SENATE LEADER TOM DEMSPEY, R-ST. CHARLES
January 7, 2015
As prepared

Lieutenant Governor, Honorable Chief Justice Russell, members of the Missouri Senate, our families, friends, and fellow Missourians. Thank you for joining us today as we commence the First Regular Session of the 98th General Assembly.

To my fellow Senators, it's a distinct honor to once again address you in this capacity. Thank you for electing me to be Pro Tem of the Missouri Senate for another two years.

I'm grateful to have your renewed vote of confidence and trust; something I know must be earned and re-earned as we work together in the months and years ahead.

I'd like to thank my beautiful wife Molly for being here today, but even more so for supporting me during my 16 years of public service and our 23 years of wedded bliss. Please stand and be recognized.

I would also like to recognize my children. They were 8, 6, and 1 when I was first sworn into the legislature.

Meaghan will graduate from Tulane this May. Abby is now a sophomore at the University of Missouri at Columbia, and Jack is a freshman at Duchesne High School.

To my children, thank you for the support and the sacrifices that you have made so that I could serve the state of Missouri. Please stand and be recognized.

I'm pleased again to have my father Ernie in attendance, along with my sister Anne and her family. At my swearing in a few moments ago, I used my father's Bible, which holds a very special place in his life.

Today, 34 of us from every corner of the state, each with our own opinions, backgrounds, and identities assemble in this chamber to fulfill our collective duty as public servants for the people of Missouri. This duty is no small undertaking and carries with it countless responsibilities and challenges.

By and large, over my 14 years of public service in the state legislature, we have come together as Republicans and Democrats to move Missouri forward in a prudent, positive manner.

New challenges await us this year and I expect this chamber to continue to work together in order to make our great state the best it can be. I am confident we can do this, because I've seen it happen before.

Last year, we enacted a historic tax cut that will keep money in the taxpayers' pockets and in the cash registers of small businesses.

This is on top of the corporate franchise tax cut passed in 2011, which came on the heels of cutting taxes on Social Security and pension benefits for low and moderate-income senior citizens in 2007.

We have demonstrated our resolve to make Missouri a low-tax state based on a conviction that our citizens should be able to keep more of their take-home pay.

After years of hard work and study, we made good on our commitment to promote public safety when we, as a bipartisan community, voted to modernize and streamline Missouri's complicated Criminal Code.

We have also pursued policies to improve economic security by reforming Missouri's unemployment laws, restoring balance and solvency to the Second Injury Fund, and bringing fairness to Missouri's regulatory environment. Creating a level playing field where the rules are fair and predictable makes our state a place where people will want to invest and to create good-paying jobs.

Unlike Washington DC, we achieved all this while consistently balancing and presenting a budget Missouri taxpayers could afford while also providing historic levels of funding for public education.

These efforts have cultivated a strong foundation for recovery, and I'm pleased to report that we are greeting this session with a more positive economic outlook.

Missouri's current unemployment rate is at 5.6%, the lowest it has been since 2008.

Layoffs are also well below pre-recession levels and the reduction in jobless claims and bankruptcy filings all point to a healthy trend for the state's job market. We are moving in the right direction, but we must continue the progress we have made.

Missouri's economy ranks among the most diverse in the United States. We will rely on the existing strengths of our versatile state and build for a greater economic revival by looking at what lies ahead in our ever-changing global marketplace.

This will require us to further strengthen Missouri's business climate and to provide advanced workforce development opportunities in order to prepare Missouri and its citizens for the economy of the future.

We have an emerging technology industry that is lending itself to a resurgence in other industries, specifically manufacturing.

We are on the verge of a manufacturing revival, and Missouri's existing foundation of support for the industry combined with our friendly business climate can easily facilitate further growth in this important sector of our state's economy.

We need to use our unique resources, core capabilities, and strategic location at the crossroads of America to target and attract companies that can take advantage of all we have to offer.

In addition to manufacturing and technology, farming and agriculture have long been a driving force for the state's vitality.

Each year, this dynamic industry and the hardworking Missourians behind it contribute billions of dollars and thousands of jobs to our economy.

Roughly two-thirds of Missouri land is used for farming purposes. Two-thirds. Nationally, Missouri ranks second in the number of farms. In case you're wondering, the state ahead of us is Texas, which is quadruple our size.

These are remarkable statistics that speak to the strength of our agricultural industry and compel us to continue building it for the future.

In that regard, it's my hope to revisit proposals passed by the legislature last year aimed at securing the future viability of Missouri agriculture. There is no reason we can't get this important legislation across the finish line early this session.

As we all know, 2014 was a great year for Missouri sports, and we all enjoyed watching our teams succeed. The Missouri Tigers football team, the Kansas City Royals, and the St. Louis Cardinals and Blues.

No matter where your loyalties lie, each of these teams was able to thrive in a highly competitive environment. And they did so with leadership, skill, determination and vision.

These teams took advantage of the natural strengths and abilities of every player to excel. This is a recipe for success that we as legislators can apply to the work we conduct over the next 5 months.

And much like the sports teams we admire, as soon as the season – or legislative session – is over, we look to the upcoming year to consider where we may have fallen short and plan for the challenges we may yet face.

Whether new or old, there will always be challenges that await us. These challenges serve as a reminder that working together we can make our state the very best place possible to raise a family, get an education, grow a business, or fulfill a dream.

As we stand on the threshold of a new legislative session, we continue to face an education crisis.

One needs to look no further than TV news coverage to see the pain in our communities, and know that the urgency for reform and educational opportunity has never been greater.

I know reform is difficult, but I also know reform is right – because access to a quality education changes lives. It's not only a pathway to a career; it's a path out of poverty and a path to foster long-term prosperity for our state. Every child matters, and every child deserves the opportunity to succeed.

Last year, we moved forward in a bipartisan manner to pass the most far-reaching education reform measure in decades. This bill included accountability for failing school districts and a window of opportunity for kids to receive a quality education close to home.

Unfortunately, vocal opponents of reform stonewalled this measure, consigning thousands of disadvantaged kids to yet another year of substandard education.

But today marks the start of a new session and Missouri will see us once again unite in our commitment to fight for our children's future.

We will not resort to easy, short-term fixes that simply redefine what it means to fail. We will foster and expect achievement for all of our children.

This is our duty; this is our mission. We will work harder so that future generations can do better.

It is my hope that our efforts this year will be met by an engaged governor who is willing to be a partner with the Legislature to help us put together an ambitious plan to raise the standard of education in our state and provide educational choices to students who need them. With that said, I am encouraged by recent conversations with the chief executive on this issue.

It is important to remember that the only kids in Missouri who currently have no choice as to the school they attend are those from families too poor to change their zip code or too poor to pay for an educational alternative.

It is especially for the sake of these students we must find a way to bring quality opportunities close to where they live.

As we work to revitalize our schools, we will also take a hard look at a number of reforms to address the systemic failures of some of Missouri's municipal courts.

Despite the best efforts of the "Mack's Creek's Law," cities across the state continue to abuse traffic enforcement and rely on the fines generated, not to discourage bad driving behavior, but rather to support their own governmental bureaucracy.

Many of these municipalities are building into their annual budgets a line item for projected revenue growth from increased traffic violations. Many more are turning a profit, while the citizens they serve are struggling to make ends meet.

In reality, they are building their own fiefdoms on the backs of the people they are supposed to represent.

The injustices of the system extend across the state, but are perhaps most pronounced in St. Louis County and its 90 municipalities - an astonishing 81 of which have their own municipal court system.

These municipalities are home to 11% of Missouri's population, but account for a troubling 34% of the state's municipal court fines and fees.

This perverse scheme of 'taxation by citation' - *to borrow a phrase* - is an unsustainable trend that stifles our communities, damages the reputation of law enforcement and creates an adversarial relationship with the very citizens they are sworn to "protect and serve".

All this erodes the social compact between citizens and their government. Government may never be perfect, but it can always be accountable and we will not turn a blind eye to the need for reform on this front.

I am pleased to relay to you that some of this important reform is taking place from within. As a case in point, Missouri's chief justice, who is present with us today, has been known over the past year and a half to conduct her version of the TV show "Undercover Boss". Dressed in capris and tennis shoes, she anonymously visits courtrooms across the state, surveying all persons who use courts to verify they are being treated fairly.

Some courts are more prone than others to show flexibility in terms of allowing payment plans for fines or accommodating mothers who need to bring a child along.

It's fair to say that her interest and presence in the operations of both municipal and circuit courts is promoting these commendable changes.

As we speak of the responsibilities of the courts and police, a point of clarification is necessary. There are many issues that have surfaced in the wake of the unrest in parts of St. Louis.

Many of the complaints voiced in recent months warrant our attention and concern, but let me be clear: the criminal acts carried out against local shopkeepers, citizens, and police officers by individuals who have hi-jacked the peaceful protests of concerned citizens have no place in a civil society where all must be subject to the rule of law.

We don't have to look far to see the serious issues confronting our state. In the long tradition of free and fair discussion in the Missouri Senate, we will discuss those important and vital issues at length and reach informed conclusions regarding them.

We recognize the challenges that are plainly before us, but we will focus on our strengths.

Though we are a diverse collection of 34 individual senators, representing every corner of our remarkable state, we have a history of setting aside personalities, politics, and party affiliation to work as a Senate to overcome any challenge facing our beloved Missouri.

We do this because we have been given a sacred trust by those who sent us here in their place, as their designees.

They expect us to be leaders, to find solutions and to maintain the highest decorum and dignity befitting any person bearing the title of senator. We will not disappoint them.

We will examine the issues, work the long hours, listen to reason and to opposing points of view, and together craft the policies that will make our state a better place to live.

Thank you and God bless.