

Conway's Column

Rep. Pat Conway | Columnist
MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



The old expression "Sending you into the fire" was quite appropriate last Wednesday in the Missouri State Capitol. Just after stepping down from the dais where I was sworn in by Circuit Judge Dan Kellogg allowing Buchanan County's 27th District to be represented again, a series of votes were taken before the noon adjournment and I was quickly informed of their intent.

As you can see from the rest of the article we addressed several pieces of legislation. Thank you to Rep. Rucker and Rep. Schaaf along with many other legislators sitting in the front row with me for helping me to understand the process. Following you will learn what we did and I will keep you updated every week as to what is going on in your state legislature.

HOUSE COMMITTEES START CUTTING BUDGET

Six House appropriations committees have started the onerous task of making cuts to Gov. Jay Nixon's proposed \$23.86 billion state operating budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1. House Budget Committee Chairman Allen Icet wants the committees to make at least \$300 million in additional general revenue cuts on top of those already suggested by the governor.

The departments of health, mental health and social services were particularly hard hit, with a committee approving about \$60 million in cuts to those agencies. Items on the chopping block included funding for health clinics that serve the poor, domestic violence shelters and the state's Alternatives to Abortion program. The committee initially defeated the bill containing spending for the health and mental health departments when two Republican members refused to support it with the cuts. Those members later switched their votes under pressure from Republican leaders, and the bill passed.

Republicans on the House Appropriations-Public Safety and Corrections Committee also revolted and joined with Democrats to defeat cuts the committee chairman proposed for the Department of Corrections. The committee refused to go along after Director George Lombardi testified that the cuts would force the department to release offenders, close prisons and reduce staffing levels to the point that remaining staffers wouldn't be safe. The committee eventually

approved the bill without cuts. After the appropriations committees finish their work, the process will move the House Budget Committee, which is expected to make additional spending cuts before the appropriations bills are debated by the full House.

LAWMAKERS OVERRIDE TAX COMMISSION ON AG VALUES

Lawmakers on Feb. 18 rejected changes in agricultural land values recommended by the State Tax Commission when the House of Representatives gave final approval to SCR 35 on a 143-11 vote. The Senate earlier had voted 30-3 in favor of the measure.

State law requires the commission to review the productive values of farmland, which are used to determine property taxes, every two years. The commission in December recommended that productive values be decreased on about 65 percent of agricultural acreage but increased on the remaining 35 percent, which accounts for the state's most productive farmland. Because the increases in values would have been substantial and the decreases relatively modest, the overall tax value of farmland would have gone up by about 11 percent.

The recommendations automatically would have taken effect on Jan. 1, 2011, had lawmakers not rejected them by March 7. Farmland values were last adjusted in 1995.

HOUSE PASSES AUTISM INSURANCE BILL ON 135-18 VOTE

On a lopsided 135-18 vote, the House of Representatives on Feb. 18 passed legislation that would require state-regulated insurance companies to provide coverage for the treatment and diagnosis of children with autism. The bill now goes to the Senate.

Under HB 1311, insurance policies would be required to cover up to \$36,000 a year in therapy costs for autistic children age 18 and under. After blocking consideration of a similar bill last year, House Speaker Ron Richard, R-Joplin, promised in January that the autism insurance measure would be the first bill the House would debate during the 2010 legislative session. Instead it was the 11th measure debated by the chamber.

HOUSE ENDORSES TAX BREAK FOR MANUFACTURERS

The House of Representatives voted 134-17 on Feb. 18 in favor tax breaks for companies

that upgrade existing manufacturing facilities in Missouri. The bill, HB 1675, would cost the state up to \$35 million a year in lost revenue.

The bill's primary purpose is to head off the potential closure of the Ford Motor Co.'s assembly plant in Claycomo, which employs 3,700 people. But other Missouri manufacturing companies could also take advantage of the tax breaks.

AIDE TO LT. GOV ON LEAVE FOR MISUSE OF RESOURCES

Republican Lt. Gov. Peter Kinder on Feb. 15 suspended a top aide for a week without pay for using Tour of Missouri resources to solicit campaign funds for a Republican House candidate. The aide, Deputy Lt. Gov. Jerry Dowell, also serves as executive director for Tour of Missouri Inc., the non-profit organization that oversees the annual bicycle race and is intertwined with the lieutenant governor's office.

A day earlier, Dowell sent an e-mail from a Tour of Missouri account soliciting funds for John Cauthorn, a Republican running for a mid-Missouri House seat. In addition to working in the lieutenant governor's office and for the Tour of Missouri, Dowell also does political consulting. According to The Associated Press, another Kinder aide called Dowell's action a "genuine mistake" but one that nonetheless warranted punishment.

HOUSE APPROVES REDUCING PHONE ACCESS FEES

The House of Representatives voted 111-40 on Feb. 18 in favor of a bill that would gradually reduce the fees local phone companies charge each other for connecting intrastate phone calls. Missouri's intrastate access fees, which typically are passed on to customers, currently are among the highest in the country. The bill, HB 1750, potentially could lower phone rates in some areas while increasing them in others.

Rep. Jim Guest's Capitol Report

Autism Legislation



For the past few years, parents of autistic children have been lobbying the legislature to get help for their children. An earlier attempt to get scholarships for these children failed.

This year legislation was filed to mandate that insurance companies cover treatment of children with autism. The incidence of autism being diagnosed has increased significantly the past few years. The insurance companies have stated that rates will be increased to cover this additional requirement. House Bills 1311 and 1341, which passed out of the House, will require insurance companies to cover children up to 18 years of age and cover up to \$36,000 in treatment per year.

There is an option for small businesses to drop the coverage if this causes them to have a drop in their revenue. Although this bill passed by a large majority, I could not vote for it.

It is estimated that only 27 percent of the children in the state would be covered. Those low income families on Medicaid would not be covered because of the financial cost to the state. This was a case where the legislature was "picking and choosing" who would get help.

In addition, I have been very critical of the federal government for trying to pass a National Health Care Plan, which would require individuals and businesses to carry health insurance or pay a penalty and then we pass legislation at the state level to require businesses to carry additional insurance. There is a companion bill in the Missouri Senate which has a higher cost in it. I do have sympathy for parents, who have children with autism, but we will soon have other disorders and diseases that parents will want covered.

As always, I can be reached at my CAPITOL OFFICE at 573-751-0246 or 866-596-1645, fax 573-526-7740 or by e-mail at jim.guest@house.mo.gov. My mailing address is Room 233B, State Capitol Building, Jefferson City, MO 65101 or at my DISTRICT OFFICE at PO Box 412, King City, MO 64463, phone 660-535-6664 or by e-mail at jimoguest@msn.com. You can catch me on the web at www.jimguest.com.

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