

Conway's Column

Rep. Pat Conway | Columnist
MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES (D)

After an amazingly quick start, with several bills already on the perfection calendar, the House has seemed to slow down the pace and begin to regroup. As my third year in Jefferson City begins, the challenge is again the budget. The Governor, after receiving the revenue estimates has again scaled back higher education funding. He promised to maintain the level for elementary and secondary education funding, but the sub-battle will be the formula for distributing these moneys to the various rural and urban school districts. Into the mix with this area is the decertification of the Kansas City School District and the court ordered right of those students to attend a school in a certified neighboring district. This has all of the signals of a very expensive requirement and how much of that funding will come from the state general revenue is quite uncertain.

Again the rising costs of healthcare have been evident in the budget and matching Medicaid funds will take an even larger share of the revenues. In the upcoming weeks I hope to be able to pinpoint some of the direct impact to our local agencies on the continued reduction in state funds. Trickle-down economics also means trickle expenses. If the State no longer wants to maintain certain services and funding, who but the local governments will bear the responsibility? It will be a long and interesting debate that will last for many years.

Here are some of the key happenings in the Capital this week.

NIXON PROPOSES HALF-BILLION IN STATE BUDGET CUTS

In delivering his fourth State of the State address, Gov. Jay Nixon on Jan. 17 proposed \$500 million in spending cuts in order to balance a \$22.98 billion state operating budget for the 2013 fiscal year without a tax increase. Nixon, a Democrat, also outlined his policy priorities for the 2012 legislative session, which include protecting worker rights, reforming charter schools, reinstating campaign contribution limits and a job creation package that emphasizes revitalizing the automotive industry in Missouri.

Although the governor's proposed budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1 would increase basic state funding for local public schools by \$5 million to more than \$3 billion, it also calls for cutting higher education spending by \$105.9 million. It would be third consecutive year that state funding of public colleges and universities would be reduced. Nixon's budget balancing plan also calls for saving \$191.7 million through efficiencies in the state's Medicaid program, with no changes in eligibility or covered services.

In addition, the governor called for eliminating another 800 state jobs, bringing the total number of positions cut from the state workforce since he took office in 2009 to more than 4,100 and resulting in the smallest number of total state employees in 15 years.

To provide additional state revenue collections in the future, Nixon also asked lawmakers to eliminate some the tax credits programs that are siphoning about \$700 million a year from the budget. Although the Senate last year made tax credit reform a priority, Republican leaders in the House of Representatives refused to go along. As a result, it is unlikely lawmakers will actively pursue reform efforts this year.



SUPREME COURT INVALIDATES SENATE REDISTRICTING PLANS

The Missouri Supreme Court on Jan. 17 unanimously struck down a judicial commission's efforts to draw new state Senate districts, creating uncertainty for the 2012 election cycle since the scheduled opening of candidate filing for the August party primaries is just six weeks away. The court ordered that the redistricting process begin anew, as the Missouri Constitution directs when a statehouse redistricting plan is found invalid. However, even if the process is expedited, there is virtually no chance it will be completed by the start of filing on Feb. 28.

The Appellate Reapportionment Commission, which consisted of six judges of the Missouri Court of Appeals selected by the Supreme Court for the task, officially submitted new Senate districts on Nov. 30 but withdrew and replaced the plan on Dec. 9 after it was pointed out that the appellate judges had ignored the state constitution's general prohibition against splitting counties among Senate districts.

Ruling in a lawsuit challenging both plans, the Supreme Court declared the first map unconstitutional for violating the county-splitting rule and found the second map invalid because the appellate commission had no authority to rescind and replace the first plan.

The appellate commission took over the job of redistricting both the state Senate and House of Representatives to account for population shifts under the 2010 U.S. Census after partisan commissions consisting of equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans failed to reach an agreement. The House redistricting plan produced by the appellate commission hasn't been challenged.

Under the constitution, the redistricting process begins from scratch with the appointment of a new partisan commission. On the day of the court's

ruling, Gov. Jay Nixon initiated the process by formally asking the state Democratic and Republican parties to submit nominees for the new commission. The parties have 60 days to respond, after which the governor has 30 days to select 10 commissioners, five from each party, from among the nominees. Once the commission is established, it has six months to develop new Senate districts. If the new commission fails, the job would again pass to another appellate commission, which would have up to 90 days to complete its work. The constitution provides no guidance as to what would happen if candidate filing opens and valid Senate districts aren't yet established.

COURT REVIVES CONGRESSIONAL REDISTRICTING LAWSUITS

The Missouri Supreme Court on Jan. 17 sent a pair of lawsuits challenging the state's new congressional districts back to a trial judge for a hearing on whether the legislation violates the constitutional requirement that the General Assembly create districts that are "as compact ... as may be." The court remanded the matter to Cole County Circuit Judge Daniel Green, who previously had dismissed the cases, for a ruling on the merits of the challenge.

In its unanimous decision, the Supreme Court signaled that the odd shapes of new Third District, which stretches from the St. Louis metro area to mid-Missouri, and the new Fifth District, which combines Kansas City and most of Jackson County with three rural counties to the east, might render the redistricting bill unconstitutional. "Districts 3 and 5 are alleged to be particularly suspect, as can be confirmed by any rational and objective consideration of their boundaries," the court said in its unsigned opinion. "However, it is a question of fact, yet to be tried, whether those districts are 'as compact and nearly equal in population as may be.'"

In order to expedite the process, the court ordered Green to render his judgment no later than Feb. 3. Regardless of his decision, it almost certainly will be appealed again to the Supreme Court for a final determination. The court indicated it wants the matter resolved quickly so that, if necessary, the General Assembly has sufficient time to enact a new redistricting bill before candidate filing opens on Feb. 28.

Thank you for allowing me to serve as the State Representative for the

27th District. It is truly an honor. If I can assist you with a state issue please contact me toll-free at 866-596-1651 or email me at pat.conway@house.mo.gov.

"Cut To the Chase"

A New Coffee Shop

Rebecca French Smith | Guest Writer
MISSOURI FARM BUREAU

Most farmers and ranchers in Missouri are passionate about agriculture.

Their passion is increasingly flowing into new outlets as they embrace social media to talk about what they do. It's a new meeting place--an online coffee shop--where thousands of conversations about food occur daily. Farmers and ranchers tweet, post and share information about market prices and regulations and policies that affect them, but they're also beginning to listen and participate in conversations about what they produce: food.

On YouTube, a video of pork production in northeast Missouri shows how hogs are raised and cared for. On Facebook, Missouri Farm Bureau's page posts information about current issues, like labor regulation proposals and food price trends. On Twitter, once you get a farmer or rancher talking it's hard to get him or her to quit. It's interesting to listen to someone who loves what they do, isn't it? But you really connect when you understand the passion behind the conversation.

While social media allows farmers to connect like never before by talking directly to consumers, there is a problem in that many farmers speak a different language. A newly created alliance of farmer- and rancher-led organizations and agricultural partners, the U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance, funded a study conducted by Maslansky Luntz & Partners to look at how effectively those in agriculture communicate with consumers. The study found what we in agriculture say and what consumers hear are often very different. So, we have an opportunity and a perfect outlet in social media to communicate better.

Consumers are concerned about their food--where it comes from, how it's grown, how it's processed and ultimately is it good for their health--and farmers and ranchers are concerned about these things. We all share these basic concerns; farmers just express it differently.

Online, the conversation to address these concerns is much bigger, and the possibility that there is someone out there who can answer your questions becomes quite good ... at the very least a dialogue has started. We've found that the broadened scope helps consumers and producers right here in Missouri, and perhaps, we contribute in ways that help others elsewhere, too.

Stop in the online coffee shop sometime, eavesdrop on MFB's Facebook page or Twitter feed and jump in the conversation. See what's going on, ask questions and keep talking to Missouri's farmers and ranchers. They enjoy the conversation, and they want to share their passion for producing food.

(Rebecca French Smith, of Columbia, is a multi-media specialist for the Missouri Farm Bureau)

