



Sunday, May 21, 2006

## Blunt reflects on end of Missouri session

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This year's legislative session brought Republicans' dominance of the statehouse into sharp relief. There were several victories, including a 10 percent ethanol standard for gasoline. There were also some high-profile defeats — most notably the failure of a plan to sell assets owned by the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority, or MOHELA, to fund campus construction projects.

In recent weeks, Gov. Matt Blunt has defended his record, made light of some of the apparent fissures in his party and highlighted those priority bills that did pass. He's also vowed to resurrect the MOHELA plan by having its board directly fund the campus projects. In an interview Thursday, the News-Press asked him for his thoughts on the second legislative session of his term in office.

Q. How are your plans progressing to have MOHELA directly fund the universities?

A. The MOHELA board had a meeting (Wednesday). Much of that was a closed meeting, but clearly what they were discussing was how they could do this, what sort of wickets they might have to go through in order to properly fund these improvements at campuses.

It is important to note that this has happened before. (MOHELA) has given the state money before; they've given campuses money before. This concept that somehow that might have been legal, but because of the magnitude of this gift it's not, is absurd.

Q. The Senate and House versions of the MOHELA plan funded items such as health care and debt relief. Do you intend to follow any of those recommendations?

A. Some of those recommendations require the Legislature to spend the money. An example is probably debt relief — I would think it would be very difficult for us to figure out a way to fund any sort of debt relief by direct contributions to the schools.

It's clearly possible that you could improve the quality of health care through the universities. It'll benefit obviously both their students and their health care professionals, but it would also help alleviate some the demands on the current health care system.

Q. The ethanol standard won't go into effect until January 2008. That's the same year you are up for re-election. Do you worry that it could be a political liability for you that year, if there are problems with its initial implementation?

A. No, I've always thought we needed some sort of phase-in period. It's probably a little longer than the phase-in I would like, but to get it through the legislative process required us to obviously work with people that were opposed or had concerns ... it gives everybody plenty of time to execute on this.

Also, I've never said I was running for re-election. I wouldn't want to assume anything that I've yet to decide.

Q. One of the Legislature's final actions this year was to pass another funeral protest ban, one that sets a distance limit and makes some corrections to the one you've already signed into law. Do you feel a second law, with a distance limit, is necessary?

A. It could be necessary. Anything we need to do to stop these despicable protests at funerals is worth doing.

Q. There's been a lot of tension between the House and the Senate in this past session. How would you rate your relationship with leaders in the Senate and in the House?

A. I think my relationship with leaders in the Senate and the House is excellent. (Sen.) Charlie Shields, I can't say enough good things about that guy. He is a terrific leader of the Missouri Senate, and the productive nature of this Senate defies anybody's expectations. Certainly as I talk to governors in other states and think about the past in Missouri, we're very fortunate that we have a leader of Charlie Shields' ability and those sorts of diplomatic skills to lead the Senate, and he's doing a tremendous job.

But I have a great relationship with leaders in both chambers. Obviously, sometimes there's disagreement, but I think we would all tell you that we're moving Missouri forward.

Q. Many of your priorities failed to pass this year. Do you feel that you've lost some of your leadership over the Legislature?

A. If you were to look at what we've passed versus what we didn't pass, it's a pretty good record. There's a lot of smaller issues that, perhaps because they weren't controversial, we were able to pass. I'm not sure that we would have passed them without a Republican House and a Republican Senate. An example would be association health plans. You might have a lot of Democrats that voted for it, but I'm not sure they would have brought it to the floor if we hadn't had those Republican leaders in place.

Q. Both Senate and House leaders have said that part of this year's discord was because Republicans got most of what they wanted last year, leaving issues on which there wasn't as much agreement for this year. Do you agree with that assessment, and what does that mean for next year?

A. Most sessions, if you passed a tort reform bill, or a worker's compensation reform bill, that in and of itself would have been a successful and productive session. We were able to do both of those things. We dealt with a terrible budget situation that we'd inherited, and fixed it. The school funding formula — so many in the press said we could never pass a new school funding formula without a tax increase, and we did that. We were just so successful last year that many of the things we believed were of greatest importance to the people of our state were already done.

But that doesn't mean that we didn't have a successful session. I think we did have a successful session. I believe that there will be other priorities that emerge between now and January, when the Legislature reconvenes.

Q. What priorities are on your radar screen for next year?

A. There's several things that we're thinking about. We probably won't roll that out for several, several months.

Q. How about immigration?

A. Oh, clearly, that's an example. We'll also look at Medicaid fraud. We're doing everything we can to root out fraud in the Medicaid system, and we're removing a significant amount of fraud, well over \$100 million.

Q. At this point in time, is there anything that you intend to veto?

A. I've yet to decide to veto anything, But to anyone who thinks (the session) wasn't successful, I think we passed 163 bills this year. That's a lot of bills. I'm not sure how many more bills a legislature needs to pass before it's a successful session.