



Saturday, May 06, 2006

MOHELA bill fails to gain approval

Blunt may bypass Legislature

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — A legislative game of chicken ended at 6 p.m. Friday, when neither side swerved and a plan to sell part of the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority crashed and burned.

But the governor's office, rather than rubberneck at the wreck, plans to simply drive around it.

Gov. Matt Blunt now plans to ask MOHELA's board of directors to bypass the Legislature and give the money directly to the colleges and universities that were supposed to benefit, said his deputy chief of staff, Rob Monsees.

"There's too much support for the governor's initiative to just let it drop by the wayside," he said.

The legal ramifications of the governor's proposal weren't immediately clear. But for Beth Wheeler, Missouri Western State University's director of external relations, it offered a hopeful end to a tense day.

"I feel like there are many roads to the same destination, and this is another possibility," she said. "I'm optimistic in traveling it and seeing if it can lead to where we want to be."

Trying to pass the bill on the last possible day was, at best, a dicey position. It has trailed controversy and rancor ever since Mr. Blunt introduced the idea in January, as a way to pay for long-deferred capital improvements at state colleges and universities. The plan included \$30.1 million math and science building at Missouri Western, as well as \$11.4 million for a bioscience building at Northwest Missouri State University.

Making matters worse was a condition pronounced by House Republican leaders. They refused to pass MOHELA unless the Senate passed a bill by Rep. Carl Bearden, R-St. Charles, which enacted a new scholarship and limited funding for state universities. Mr. Bearden told the Senate recently, the two issues were "linked at the heart."

But university officials, the Senate, House Democrats and even some House Republicans took a dim view of that provision.

"We might have to do heart surgery — or kill the patient," said Rep. Ed Wildberger, D-St. Joseph.

It was the latter possibility that won out. A proposed compromise on the bill squeaked by on a close 83-70 vote in the House Friday — and that came only after Republicans held an hour-long caucus to twist some arms. But the measure endured a four-hour filibuster in the Senate before Senate Majority Floor Leader Charlie Shields, R-St. Joseph, threw in the towel and said it couldn't

pass.

Ultimately, the House passed the MOHELA plan on a 113-40 vote. But leaders there refused to send the measure to the Senate unless Mr. Bearden's bill passed. With about 40 minutes left before the deadline, House leaders called it a day.

"I think there were senators over there who thought in the end that we would cave, I guess," said House Speaker Rod Jetton, R-Marble Hill.

Mr. Shields had helped craft the compromise on Mr. Bearden's bill, which would have made future increases in higher education funding contingent on putting more money into student scholarships.

University officials, who hated Mr. Bearden's first proposal, weren't thrilled with the compromise either. Lobbyists for universities contacted their legislators and urged their opposition.

Democratic St. Joseph Reps. Ed Wildberger and Martin Rucker voted against Mr. Bearden's bill, but Rep. Dr. Rob Schaaf, R-St. Joseph, voted for it and urged several of his fellow House Republicans to do so as well. He said it was the only way to pass the MOHELA bill. All three St. Joseph representatives voted for the MOHELA bill.