



Sunday, April 30, 2006

MOHELA bill faces final push

Capital improvements central as deadline nears

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Forrest Gump would have no trouble forecasting the state's plan to sell student-loan assets. Just like a box of chocolates, you don't know what you're going to get.

Lawmakers have until Friday to sort out how they wish to spend the expected proceeds from the sale of part of the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority, or MOHELA. With \$450 million or more at stake, the spending proposal has undergone a dizzying number of revisions and amendments.

Last week, those changes caused tensions to rise between the House and the Senate. But with just five legislative days left, leaders in the two chambers are playing nice, talking to each other and expressing optimism that the plan will come through.

"Around here, you can't get too upset over a committee's or even a chamber's action on a bill," said House Speaker Rod Jetton, R-Marble Hill. "That's what chambers and committees are for."

Gov. Matt Blunt pitched the MOHELA idea in January as a way to fund long-delayed construction projects at colleges and universities, including a new math and science building at Missouri Western State University and a biologics building at Northwest Missouri State University.

Amazingly, the capital improvements remain the focus of the bill even at this late date. Its one of the few areas of agreement.

One of the biggest differences isn't really part of the MOHELA proposal at all: it's a proposal by the House to create new scholarships, while setting limits on the amount of money the state would give to higher education and capping the tuition rates students would pay.

The bill only narrowly passed the House. It got an even chillier reception in the Senate Education Committee last week, after its sponsor, Rep. Carl Bearden, R-St. Charles, told the committee that his bill and the MOHELA proposal were "joined at the heart."

Moments later, the committee, at the suggestion of Sen. Charlie Shields, R-St. Joseph, gutted the bill of everything except its scholarship provisions. He called Mr. Bearden's threat to link the bills' fates "somewhat disrespectful of the process."

Mr. Bearden and Mr. Shields discussed the matter Wednesday night, and both now say they think they can solve the problem in the coming week — though Mr. Bearden still insists that the bill contain some limits on university funding.

"We don't want to do the quid-pro-quo, one bill versus another," Mr. Shields said. "But in reality, I

don't think there's going to be a problem, because I think we'll get this (scholarship) bill done prior to getting the budget done."

Through all of this, university officials are anxiously awaiting a final product.

"We don't really jump at every twist and turn, because we know there will be many," said Beth Wheeler, Missouri Western's Director of External Relations. "But we're certainly vigilant about watching it and keeping involved."