

# Rep. Aull prepares for final term

Wednesday, January 5, 2011

By Nathan St.Clair/Concordian Staff

The 96th legislative session of the Missouri General Assembly convenes this week and legislators will have several large issues -- the FY 2012 budget, increasing state revenues, handling a request to repeal Proposition B and revamping congressional districts -- to address said Democratic Rep. Joe Aull of Marshall.

First and foremost, the General Assembly will have to address the 2012 budget.

Aull said the next fiscal year will be tough and a lot of programs and services will again experience cuts. The state, to this point, has had several millions of dollars in federal stimulus money to help offset the decline in revenue. However, with only about \$200 million of stimulus money remaining, more expenditures will have to be cut or reduced.

"We'll have to make more cuts, even though it looks like the economy is improving," Aull said.

He said his approach to budget cuts is to trim a little bit from several programs. In essence, he sees decreasing funding for luxuries certain state-funded departments or programs have would force them to revamp their services and tighten their budgets until funding is again available. He said, however, many programs and departments have already been hit hard by budget cuts and several are operating on as little as possible.

"It's hard to prioritize when you have two or three programs or services sitting out there," Aull said, "and you're trying to decide which ones are more necessary and which ones can survive" more cuts.

He said finding ways to decrease spending is only half of the battle. The other issue is trying to figure out how to increase revenues. Aull thinks a missed source of income is a tax on Internet sales. Everyday, thousands of Missourians purchase products online, but avoid paying any sort of sales tax.

"It would increase revenues and make sure everyone would be on a level playing field," he said.

Also, he suggested an increase in tobacco taxes. Missouri continues to have the lowest tax on tobacco products, when many states are raising their tax.

"I am not going after cigarette smokers," Aull said, "but we should look at them and from a fairness stand point" elevate it.

To help increase revenues some senators and representatives are proposing changing Missouri's tax system and eliminating corporate income, corporate franchise, bank franchise and state sales and use taxes starting Jan. 1, 2013. Within five years, Missouri would use a "fair tax," as it has been labeled, to completely generate revenues.

Under the system, Missourians would pay a higher sales tax on most items and even some previously exempt services in order to support the state budget. Senate Bill 29, introduced during March 2010 by Republican Senator Chuck Purgason of Caulfield could, according to different estimates, increase the sales tax -- currently 4.225 percent -- to five to seven percent statewide.

The Missouri Budget Project (MBP), a non-profit public policy analysis organization, estimates it could be as high as 11 percent, a figure calculated by the MBP and the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy.

Supporters say it would increase revenues and create more jobs by promoting industry and commercial growth.

The opposition says it will unfairly tax low-income families, push business near the state's borders to surrounding states and create inconsistencies in revenues, making it difficult to plan budgets.

Several exemptions would stay in place, while several others would be eliminated.

Senate Bill 29 summary states, "Component parts or ingredients of a new tangible personal property to be sold at retail, intangible property, previously-taxed property, motor fuel, insurance premiums and fees paid on insurance products, donations to and purchases by charitable organizations, federal government purchases, tuition paid for educational services, and business-to-business transactions including agriculture will be exempt from the new tax while all other exemptions and tax credits will be eliminated."

"I have some real concerns about it," Aull said. "I don't think anyone can give you a fair estimate of how much a sales tax would offset the loss of the income tax."

"Regardless of what we do, though," he said, "it will have to be voted on by the people. I would have to say I am against it, but I am willing to look at it."

Another issue that representatives and senators will have to address is a repeal of Proposition B filed by Republican Senator Bill Stouffer of Napton. Prop B, referred to as "Puppy Mill Cruelty Prevention Act," was passed by Missouri voters in November with 52 percent of Missouri voters approving it. Much of the support for the proposition came from Missouri's metropolitan areas such as Kansas City and St. Louis, while most of rural Missouri voted against it.

Since the Nov. 2 vote, supporters and opponents have continued to campaign for and against the measure. Missourians for the Protection of Dogs, a nonprofit organization that has spearheaded the campaign for the measure has said legislators should respect the decision by voters and not repeal Prop. B.

"I don't like overturning something the people have voted on," Aull said. But "I would like to see Prop. B go. The people in my area voted against it and I have to vote like my people ... ."

Aull said while the law does make regulations stricter, the core of the problem is enforcement of those stipulations.

"It's an issue of enforcement more than an issue of having bad laws in place," he said. "Let's make sure we are enforcing the laws we have."

Another hot issue in 2011 is the redistricting of Missouri's congressional districts after it was announced in December the state would lose a seat in the United States House of Representatives. Aull, a member of the redistricting committee, said the decision will be based on population changes in certain areas and political affiliations and interests and needs of the cities and counties within the various districts.

The Missouri General Assembly must decide on the boundaries and put it to a vote. If legislators fail to agree and the issue lingers too long, it will go to the courts system for a decision. Aull would like District 4 to stay relatively the same.

Aull said the district incorporates many like-minded leaders and benefits its rural citizens by remaining a district that encompasses mostly rural counties and small towns.

"It would give us a good voice in Washington," he said.

The district changes will not take effect until the 2012 election.

Aull said he plans to sponsor a few educational bills, as this is a priority for him, that would ensure money is distributed fairly to school districts and give schools more latitude in how they spend money.

Due to term limits, Aull is serving his last term as a representative and will leave office in 2012.

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