MU/Cerner tie to chase tech trends

Partners foresee medical records in a card swipe.

By Janese Heavin

Saturday, October 17, 2009

Take an ATM card to any bank in America, and you can withdraw funds and see in real time how much money is left in your account. But don’t expect that same technology at a doctor’s office: If you see a new physician, he’s not going to have automatic access to medical records stored at a previous health care provider’s office.

That’s where the new Tiger Institute for Health Innovation is expected to come in. The partnership between MU Health Care and the Cerner Corp. aims to develop new technologies to make health care more efficient and also improve quality of care.

The age of digital records “has pushed banking, the airline industry, the newspaper industry, … but health care is still in the telephone era,” said Hal Williamson, vice chancellor for the University of Missouri’s health sciences.

The deal with Cerner was announced late last month after being shrouded in secrecy for a year. The partnership means 100 MU information technology workers will become Cerner employees in January, although other details of the MU and Cerner agreement are still being hashed out.

A dozen or so Tiger Institute projects are already under way, mainly to get the university’s health care system up-to-speed on technology required to qualify for federal stimulus money. The recovery act allocates some $35 billion in incentives to hospitals that use electronic health records in a “meaningful” way.

One technology being developed is expected to improve workflow, said Sherry Browne, who will be executive director of the institute. The goal is to let doctors use a badge to retrieve electronic health information without having to spend time logging into different computers and hunting for certain records. Instead, one flash of a badge would automatically log that physician in and bring back the last records he viewed.

Other Tiger Institute work will begin when a contract is finalized, likely by January. The work can be broken down into four areas.
In addition to getting the Tiger Institute poised to meet federal requirements, the so-called “road map” area would identify areas in electronic records that need to be fixed or improved. Work in this area also is expected to give health care providers a way to better analyze certain treatments.

Browne used the example of surgeons who treat joint replacements differently. An electronic database could allow those doctors to compare their own patients’ results with the results of people who were treated with different techniques or replacement products. Such comparisons now can only be done by poring over piles of charts and paper records.

The Tiger Institute’s Living Lab will be where “engineering meets the practice of medicine,” Browne said.

The goal of the lab is to get Cerner to develop innovations in an actual patient-care environment instead of in an office. That would allow medical staff and students to work alongside the engineers who can develop the technology to meet patient needs.

For years, health information technology companies have created hardware and software products for providers without having that firsthand knowledge. That “doesn’t make sense,” Williamson said, “and the end result has been some expensive systems that don’t work very well.”

Ultimately, administrators expect to commercialize some of those new products, generating revenues for both entities.

The networking area of the Tiger Institute aims to link the university to other health care providers in Mid-Missouri and, possibly, the state. Having that network could provide a way to get second opinions or advice by sending electronic records, rather than a patient, to another clinic.

One idea gaining traction is a swipe card that would contain a patient’s medical history. A patient would be able to take that card to other providers who have linked to the university’s system. With one swipe, that provider would have access to lab results and other records without requiring a patient to request paper copies or fill out a new set of health forms.

That could be beneficial if someone having a medical crisis was unable to communicate with doctors. A health swipe card would allow doctors unfamiliar with the patient to have ready access to the full medical history.

Williamson stressed that privacy is a top consideration when developing any type of health card.

Personal health and preventive care also are part of the Tiger Institute’s proposed strategy. Some preventive technology already is being used, but the idea is to give patients more control.

For instance, a patient with high blood pressure would have a home device to check it regularly, as electronic results automatically would be sent to the person’s health care provider. A nurse
would receive an alert if a patient's blood pressure rose, and that provider could call the patient to give him or her tips to lower blood pressure before it becomes dangerous.

Ideally, that would save the patient from needing medical treatment by preventing a more serious problem.

Administrators have estimated that the institute could save Missouri $1 billion a year through better management of chronic diseases, better quality of care and a reduction in the number of malpractice lawsuits.

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With the help of a recent $10 million research grant, Washington University scientists are expanding their genetic sequencing project to include 20 different types of cancers.

Professors at the University of Missouri-Columbia are using a $5 million grant to fund a five-year program to train 80 ninth-grade science teachers in physics.

And St. Louis University is using a grant to work with Southern Illinois University Edwardsville on ways to stop people from developing a tolerance to painkillers.

In total, more than $110 million in research grants has flowed into the region's research universities in the last couple of months. It's a one-time shot in the arm, thanks to the federal stimulus.

And it's not over. More grants and awards continue to trickle in, with a smaller round of grants next year.

The large influx of research dollars has been a welcome addition to universities, many of them frustrated by essentially flat federal medical research funding in the last several years.

"The real benefit is not purely economic," said Dr. Larry Shapiro, dean of Washington U.'s medical school. "We're going to have an opportunity to create a hope for many patients who are suffering from a series of debilitating diseases."

There is an economic benefit, too. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 requires universities to closely track and report the number of jobs
created or retained by these grants.

Washington U. has received about $80 million in stimulus-related funding from 208 grants it had been awarded as of the end of September. That's roughly a fifth of the $460 million in research dollars the medical school usually hauls in every year.

The extra dollars have already meant 150 new or sustained jobs for research specialists, postdoctoral fellows, data processors and the like. But when it's all said and done, Shapiro expects the jobs number to jump up to more than 500.

About 35 new or sustained jobs have already resulted from MU's $30 million in stimulus-funded research grants. That number will likely rise. And SLU estimates that 58 jobs will eventually materialize out of the $7.5 million in grants it has brought in thus far.

The National Institutes of Health, which usually gives out $30 billion in grants a year, was given an extra $10 billion to hand out under the federal stimulus program. And the National Science Foundation was given an extra $3 billion to distribute.

Following the passage of the federal stimulus program, researchers began working around the clock in the spring to fill out grant applicants to compete for the new funds.

"It's been a very definite push," said Rob Duncan, MU's vice chancellor for research. The school also hired three part-time grant writers to help with the surge in applications.

Washington U. researchers were able to respond so quickly to the call for grants because there was a "huge amount of pent-up demand," Shapiro said. "Our faculty have had lots of good ideas that they have wanted to pursue that they have not been able to get support for."

Between 1998 and 2003, the NIH budget doubled. But since then, its budget has more or less stayed the same. And Shapiro said that after adjusting for inflation, the numbers translate to a 13 percent to 15 percent decrease.
The shut off of that funding spigot in the last five to six years has been painful for researchers, who have been competing for fewer dollars, Shapiro said. Whereas the university used to have a roughly 25 percent success rate in getting grants, that rate plummeted to 10 percent to 12 percent in recent years, he said.

"It's discouraging for people who then spend a lot of time writing applications instead of doing the work," Shapiro said.

The infusion of these stimulus grants is now boosting the university's success rate back to its previous levels.

Of the 902 applications Washington U.'s faculty submitted for these one-time funds, about 208 of them were granted. And so many projects that had been stopped or were not fully funded are getting new life.

For example, one of Washington U.'s awards is to a project to help about 120 families from the St. Louis area help their overweight children go on a four-month weight-loss program followed by a maintenance program. It's a program for which researcher Denise Wilfley had unsuccessfully applied for grants before.

Raymond Tait, SLU's vice provost of research, said it's too soon to know whether this influx of grants will lead to an overall year-end increase in research funding at SLU this year. That's because the NIH has prioritized distributing its stimulus grants, which has in turn slowed down its regular grant process.

Still, he said, the school has been trying to ramp up its research efforts in recent years. SLU brings in about $60 million in grants a year.

Since the 2007 opening of its $67 million Edwards A. Doisy Research Center, SLU faculty have been submitting more applications, Tait said. So he expects to see the number of awards start going up soon.

While area universities are grateful for these stimulus funds, the excitement
is tempered by the knowledge that they are one-time funds and that federal research funding could return to previous levels in another couple of years.

MU's Duncan is hopeful. "I think a number of universities were generally on the decline in their sponsored research programs and the stimulus turned that around," he said. "But I hope that since we are growing, that we will continue on this very rapid path even after the stimulus funds are complete."

Last year, Mizzou received a total of $233 million in research grants and contracts — up $23 million from the year before.

Research leaders are also concerned that younger researchers might get discouraged and look for other careers if the nation returns to pre-stimulus funding levels in a couple of years. It takes 10 to 13 years of training and fieldwork for a young researcher to make it from college to an entry-level assistant professor, Shapiro noted.

"You can't just turn on and off that pipeline rapidly and expect it to sustain itself," he said.
Let's consider two families with kids. The first mom and pop buy fancy cars, head off to Vegas, buy the biggest house they can afford. They take a lackadaisical attitude toward work and generally blow money.

The next mom and pop work hard and advance in their careers. They drive clunkers, vacation in Porchville, live modestly and sock away savings.

Guess which family is going to get the most financial aid when their kid heads off to college?

Hedonism has rewards beyond a good suntan, and they come in the form of college financial aid. The federal financial aid formula punishes thrift and hard work. So, let's see how a thrifty family can work this perverse system.

This column is too short to give a complete strategy. For that, try www.finaid.org, an excellent website. Click on "financial aid applications" then "maximize your eligibility."

Most colleges base aid awards on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Filling it out is as pleasant as a tooth extraction. After you submit it, Uncle Sam will tell you your "expected family contribution" — the amount you're expected to pay out of your family budget. Have a crying towel handy, or a stiff scotch.
Some pricey private colleges require a second headache-producer called a CSS Profile form. This column deals mainly with the FAFSA.

The FAFSA formula is complex and considers both your savings and income. Income counts much more than savings, so try to look poorer.

The FAFSA looks at the January-to-December calendar year before your kid enters college. So, that's not the year to cash out of your big stock market gains. If you've been thinking of taking a month off to finish that novel, do it the year before your kid enters school. If you expect a bonus, ask if you can defer it.

If you own your own business, you might cut your salary. (This doesn't work with partnerships, sole proprietorships and S corporations, says Finaid.)

Send mom or pop back to school. The formula boosts aid when multiple family members are in college, but some schools will want proof that you're really seeking enlightenment, and not just gaming the financial aid system.

If you make under $50,000, and can fill out tax forms 1040A or EZ, the formula will ignore your savings. If you're just a hair over the limit, try to get under.

The FAFSA penalizes thrift, but many parents escape the bite. The formulas used at most colleges exempt a lot of savings, depending on your age. A 48-year-old mom and pop might get a pass on about $50,000, says Mark Kantrowitz, publisher of Finaid and the Fastweb.com scholarship search site.

If you need to buy something big — a car, for instance — spend the cash before filing the FAFSA.

The federal formula will demand about 5 percent of the rest of your savings every year. That doesn't sound like much, but it adds up. Parents with two kids in college over eight years can see a big chunk of their nest egg disappear.

The bite on a kid's own savings is higher — 20 percent a year. So it's usually a bad idea to save money in a child's name. You'll save a little on income taxes, but lose a lot of financial aid. Use a tax-free 529 college savings plan instead, which is generally treated
as the parents' asset.

If you have money in the kid's name, spend it on things she'll need for school, such as a car or a computer, before filing the FAFSA. You can't charge the kid for the groceries he devours, or other things parents normally supply.

Spend all of the rest of the child's money on first-year college costs, so the kid will look poorer to the government in her sophomore year.

The federal formula doesn't count your retirement savings or equity in your home (although some private colleges will count your home value). The FAFSA also doesn't go any easier on you because you've run up big consumer debts. So, use savings to pay down the mortgage and car loan and boost your retirement accounts.

"If you have high credit card debt and money in the bank, use the money to pay down the credit cards," says Kantrowitz. Of course, you should keep enough cash handy to carry you through a job loss or another emergency.

Fill out the FAFSA even if you don't think you'll qualify for scholarships. It's required for federally backed student loans. Scholarship funds run out, giving early birds an advantage, so file the form as soon as you can after Jan. 1.

A recent study by from professors Tansel Yilmazer at the University of Missouri-Columbia and Patryk Babiarz at Purdue University indicate that parents may be getting the message on FAFSA. They found no evidence that the student aid system caused people to save less overall.

But parents subject to FAFSA's penalty on savings tend to keep more of their money in retirement accounts and have higher home equity, both of which escape the formula.

Congress is now considering bills that would do away entirely with the penalty for savings in the FAFSA formula. Frugal families would cheer.

Some think Congress should go a step further. A system based on income tax returns would be much simpler for parents, and yield similar results.
MU to receive $1.1 million donation for women's health care training

By Alycia Yount
October 16, 2009 | 3:46 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — George Huggins has dedicated his career to teaching physicians and advancing women's health care. His wife, Jean Baker, has had ties to MU for generations.

As a result of their dedication to education and ties to the university, the couple has pledged $1.1 million dollars of their estate to establish the George Huggins and Jean Baker Endowed Chair in Obstetrics and Gynecology and Women's Health. It will be part of the department of obstetrics and gynecology and women's health at MU.

"The remainder of the estate will be funneled into scholarships for students" in the School of Medicine, said Huggins, who appeared with his wife at an announcement ceremony on Friday in the Reynolds Alumni Center.

For Huggins, the decision to donate the money came from his experiences at MU. Raised in St. Louis, he graduated from medical school at MU and completed his residency in 1967. "My first year of medical school was $650," he said, laughing at the cost of tuition then.

Huggins was a teaching physician, primarily in gynecology, at the University of Mississippi, the University of Pennsylvania and at Johns Hopkins University. When he retired from Johns Hopkins, he was awarded the university's Master Educators Award.

But although he taught elsewhere in his long career, Huggins credits his home state of Missouri — which he told the gathering is properly pronounced "Missourah" — with giving him the opportunity and the resources to become a doctor.

"This was an opportunity for us to give back to those who follow us," he said.
Money from the donation will pay for the salary of the person who holds the chair and allow for "protected time" to concentrate on educational activities, rather than administrative duties, Huggins said. Unfortunately, that ability and focused attention has been eroded over the years, he added.

The decision to donate more than $1 million to MU was discussed over many years, said Baker, who has a bachelor's degree in education from the university. "My mother and brother were able to attend MU because of endowed scholarships," she said, going on to note the importance of helping others receive a college education.

Baker said her grandmother decided to live in Columbia so that her children could live at home while they went to college and be able to afford college. A life observation from that grandmother, who ran a boarding house for college students, has had a lasting effect on Baker: "A person with one semester of college will do better in life than a person with no college." Baker established two previous scholarships at MU: The Chester A. and V. Marguerite Baker Memorial Endowment; and the Larry S. and Jean Baker Harper Endowed Scholarship Fund for International Agricultural Studies.

"It's important to help people who might not be able to go to school on their own," Baker said in a release. "By giving, I set an example for my children to give back."

Huggins and Baker, who live in Tuscon, Ariz., met some 40 years ago at MU when he was a medical student and she was a nursing student. They reconnected when Baker was looking for a physician for her ailing mother. A resulting correspondence between the two eventually became a marriage.
Walker retires

The longtime dean of MU's Trulaske College of Business is retiring.

Bruce Walker is handling this inevitable chore about as well as possible, stepping down while he is ahead. The school is prospering, and Walker wants to become a full time faculty member and teach marketing. He says it's time for new energy in the top spot.

Under Walker's 20-year incumbency, the college has grown substantially in enrollment and stature. Moreover, Walker and his wife, Pam, have been active members of the larger Columbia community. They are important contributors to both town and gown.

HJW III
MU's Tate and Switzler halls prepare for renovations

By Andrew C. Jenkins
October 19, 2009 | 12:01 a.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — MU teaching faculty members, staff, graduate students and classes housed in Tate and Switzler halls are in the process of moving out due to renovations planned for the two buildings.

Both Tate and Switzler will be gutted, Arts and Science Dean Michael O'Brien said. Among other things, the buildings will be updated with new elevators, modern heating and cooling systems, state-of-the-art technology in the classrooms and better specifications for handicapped access. Also, all asbestos will be removed from the buildings.

“I think the faculty will be pleased when they move back in,” O'Brien said. “People are looking forward to it.”

But that could be awhile. Renovations are scheduled to be done by July 2011.

O'Brien said the Tate and Switzler renovations will cost $9 million and $5 million, respectively.

Tate Hall, west of Ellis Library and near the bend of Conley Avenue and Ninth Street, houses the English department, which has about 63 teaching faculty members and 84 graduate student teachers, said English professor Al Devlin. Faculty and staff are in the midst of moving to McReynolds Hall, where Devlin said they likely will be for about two years.

McReynolds, west of Peace Park on the northwest side of campus, is typically used as swing space, O'Brien said.
Workers have been busy for weeks hauling furniture and boxes out of Tate and loading them into moving trucks.

"My impression is that this is a very complicated move made with minimum inconvenience," Devlin said. "On the whole, it has been pretty well orchestrated."

Classrooms in Tate will close soon, except for Room 22, a large auditorium that will remain open through December for final exams, O'Brien said. The remaining classes will be relocated to various places on campus.

Thomas Musser, a senior English major who attends class in Tate, said he is glad the building is going to be renovated.

"It's a good idea," Musser said. "It's good to see the English department get a cut of the action."

The communication department and special degree programs are in Switzler Hall, which was built in 1871, making it the oldest classroom building on campus. Both departments plan to move out during the week of Nov. 9-13, but classes will remain in Switzler until Nov. 20, said Michael Kramer, chairman of the communication department. The departments and classes housed in Switzler, on the northwest side of Francis Quadrangle, will relocate to the Heinkel Building on Seventh Street until renovations are complete.

About 14 teaching faculty members and 30 graduate students will be displaced from Switzler Hall.

"We're very excited for the renovations," Kramer said. "The idea of the temporary space will be challenging, but the building is badly in need of renovation."

Kramer said the renovations will help the communication department look more like a quality program, which will in turn help with recruiting new faculty members.

The renovations are funded by bonds the University of Missouri System issued that total more than $332 million. Of that amount, $35 million was allocated for "critical repairs, renovations and adaptations" of buildings throughout the system, according to a UM System news release.
Both halls have been near the top of the capital review list for many years, O'Brien said. The list ranks buildings by those that are most in need of renovations.

Campus Facilities will remove everything that can be recycled to make the project as "green" as possible.

O'Brien said the renovations will not diminish the historical integrity of the buildings. Architectural details such as the arched windows will not be altered.

Devlin said he was asked by Pat Okker, chairwoman of the English department, to collate e-mails from faculty members that included recommendations and priorities regarding the renovation.

The first priority of English department faculty is better teaching space, Devlin said. Many professors want smaller seminar-style rooms in Tate that would reflect the particular curriculum of the department. These rooms would be ideal for capstone courses, graduate seminars and creative writing courses.

Another priority of faculty members is the creation of communal meeting spaces where students can meet with other students and professors. As of now, Devlin said, there are only small, cramped corridors for students to meet in.

The third priority is to preserve the historical character of the building.

Devlin said Dean O'Brien has met with the English department faculty and was receptive to their concerns and recommendations.
Brilliant light a reason for collaboration

By Janese Heavin

Sunday, October 18, 2009

The University of Missouri is teaming up with Canadian researchers to have access to the latest generation of medical imaging.

Administrators and researchers from the University of Saskatchewan spent Wednesday touring the MU campus before sharing examples of the high-resolution medical images they’re creating using the Canadian Light Source synchrotron.

A synchrotron is a source of brilliant light produced by magnets and radio frequency waves. Infrared, ultraviolet and X-ray light are shown to stations where scientists can select different parts of the spectrum to see the microscopic nature of matter down to the atomic level.

The Canadian synchrotron is one of just 42 in the world, according to information from Canadian Light Source Web site. The $173.4 million facility opened on the campus in 2004.

In May, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research awarded $3.74 million to sponsor health-imaging research using that light facility.

On Wednesday, Saskatchewanian researchers showed various examples of the types of X-ray imaging now available. One depicted not only the bones but the soft tissue in a knee joint; another showed the intricate detail of a fly’s anatomy.

“The fly was just an amazing example of the level of imagery you can get,” said Rob Duncan, MU’s vice chancellor of research. “You can see the whole organism and at the same time have the necessary luminosity to go down and look at the molecular level. You can see how the cellular level affects the whole organism and start to really understand, in detail, the pathways to disease and recovery.”

Combining the new technology with the imaging capabilities of MU’s nuclear reactor could provide a method of medical imaging “that’s second to none in the world,” Duncan said. “The most exciting thing to me is how we can use this new technology in concert with our own technology to be at the forefront of medical research.”

Ultimately, that imaging and research will lead to better treatments, prescription medications and prevention of diseases, he said.
MU and the University of Saskatchewan have entered into a memorandum of understanding, and research projects are already being proposed. "It's off to a great start," Duncan said. "It looks like a promising collaboration between the two institutions."

Reach Janese Heavin at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jheavin@columbiatribune.com.
Best of the blogs

Going green

Team Missouri, made up of students from the Missouri University of Science and Technology and the University of Missouri, placed 11th out of 20 teams in the fourth Solar Decathlon in Washington. A German team was first, followed by a team from Illinois. Each team built a sustainable-energy home on the Mall and was judged in 10 categories.

More on these stories at Dollars & Sense at economy.kansascity.com.

Posted on Fri, Oct. 16, 2009 11:04 PM
Tigers keep the faith in Jayhawks' territory

Alumni to seek KU club status.

By Janese Heavin

Saturday, October 17, 2009

It's not easy being gold, at least when you're in Jayhawks country.

That's why Robert Rescot — a University of Missouri graduate-turned-University of Kansas graduate student — wants to form a support group of sorts for others of similar stripes.

Rescot hopes to form a Mizzou alumni chapter at KU and plans to submit a formal club proposal by the end of this semester. He's not sure Kansas will accept the club, but "I don't know why not," he said. "I think it's a brilliant idea."

Forming a Mizzou alumni chapter on the campus of another college isn't traditional. Most groups form in geographic areas, but Todd McCubbin, executive director of the Mizzou Alumni Association, said he'd be willing to assist.

"We're always excited when folks want to be tied back to their alma mater in some way, and we want to help make sure that happens," he said. "This is new for us, but we'll work with them and support them the best we can."

The idea of an MU group at KU started out as a joke between Rescot and two other Mizzou graduates while dining out in Lawrence, Kan., about a year ago.

"We were joking that it would be funny to put together some sort of student alumni association actually at the university" in Lawrence, he said.

Tiffany Huggard-Lee, an MU graduate earning a master's degree at KU, was at that dinner and said she liked the irony of the idea.

"It's in a very lighthearted context, something we have in common that we can laugh and joke about," she said.

But the plan has serious merit, too, Rescot said. It could be a way to get past the sports rivalry that sometimes overshadows academic opportunities.
Rescot, for instance, said he wouldn't have even gone to KU had it not been for a chance meeting with a Kansas professor at a conference in Washington, D.C. Rescot was looking at other graduate schools at the time but learned that the professor's research area aligned with his own interest in transportation engineering.

"Sports aside, at the end of the day, the opportunity at Kansas too good to pass up," he said. "If it weren't for happenstance and running into that professor in Washington, I might have overlooked the University of Kansas, and that would have been a tragedy, at least for me. There are lots of opportunities in graduate programs on both campuses that complement one another very well, depending on research interests."

So the idea of an MU club at KU "is not all about tweaking one group of people off or promoting hostility or any of that craziness," he said, "but just to promote genuine goodwill and have a little bit of fun, too."

Reach Janese Heavin at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jheavin@columbiatribune.com.
The Tribune's View

Sewer billing

A belated city recovery

Sunday, October 18, 2009

Not long ago Bill Weitkemper, city sewer maintenance superintendent, discovered many customers were not being billed, costing the city hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Typical escapees were residents in apartment complexes, tenants of shopping centers and various departments of the University of Missouri where central administration received one individual-customer bill for service rendered in many locations. At MU alone the city finally calculated the institution owes some $500,000 in back charges.

According to e-mail records obtained by the Tribune, Weitkemper had been warning his colleagues and managers for some time, but nothing was done seemingly out of reluctance to anger paying customers who, after all, were complying with city billing requests.

Even after city officials acknowledged the errors, Weitkemper said billing was done haphazardly. The most obvious aberration was a deal made with MU to catch up by paying about $50,000 extra per year over 10 years while smaller customers were asked to pay up more quickly.

City officials said asking the university to immediately pay a half-million in nonbudgeted costs is too much. Smaller private customers might have a similar opinion about their own circumstances.

One way or another, the city needs to get back on track as soon as possible for reasons of equity and proper revenue generation. The first step was taken when the problem was recognized, thanks to Weitkemper. Collecting the amounts in arrears is next, and it should be done as promptly as possible. Customers have in effect had interest-free loans from the city, but they have been complying in full with city billing.

Long term, of course, the billing system should be fixed. One wonders how such an obvious error could be missed for so long. It was stupid but innocent.

HJW III
MU forum on race fights fear

Students act out tense scenarios.

By Janese Heavin

Friday, October 16, 2009

Correction appended

College students questioned a professor’s nationality and suggested races “stick with their own kind” last night — but it was all mock interaction as part of a skit launching a discussion about race on the University of Missouri campus.

The forum, “Courageous Conversations about Race & Civility,” was the first of a three-part series and attracted about 100 attendees at Cornell Hall. The series continues 6 p.m. Oct. 29 in the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center, and the last forum is set for Nov. 19.

During most of last night’s two-hour program, audience members took turns questioning the characters in the interactive skit about their beliefs. The skit featured four students attending a college similar to MU who challenged the need for affirmative action and questioned why minorities have access to certain scholarships.

A character named Bobbi sparked the most reaction when she proclaimed that whites are superior to minorities and suggested that races should stick “with their own kind.”

In reality, actress Lauren Zima, a graduate student, stressed that she didn’t really believe that but that her character’s statements were based on things she has heard from fellow students.

Evan Hamilton, a senior journalism major who is black, said afterward he hasn’t met anyone like “Bobbi” at MU, but he does understand that some students don’t have experience interacting with other races or cultures before college. As a diversity peer educator, he has spent time trying to educate people of different races about one another’s points of view.

“At the core of it is fear,” he said. “It’s hard to try to cross cultures and open minds to new subjects if all you’ve been taught is from your parents.”

The “Courageous Conversations” series is part of the Chancellor’s Diversity Initiative. Roger Worthington, assistant deputy chancellor for diversity, said the race program is needed because of tensions across the country.
A video montage played during the forum highlighted that. It featured short news clips, including Kanye West’s assertion that President George W. Bush hates black people, Rush Limbaugh’s accusation that Sonia Sotomayor is a “reverse racist” and former President Jimmy Carter’s concerns that racism plagues President Barack Obama’s administration.

“The video showed the context of where this came from,” Worthington said. “There’s a great deal of animosity. That’s why this is necessary.”

Noor Azizan-Gardner, manager of the diversity program, said she is optimistic things will eventually change. She has lived in South Africa, a nation that spent years “trying to get everybody together” and did so through truth and reconciliation, she said.

“That is the path we need to go down,” she said. “We need to take into account history and the past we have as a nation.”

This page has been revised to reflect the following correction:

SECOND THOUGHTS: Friday, October 16, 2009

A story about the University of Missouri’s Courageous Conversations series incorrectly said the next forum is Thursday. It will be 6 p.m. Oct. 29 in the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center.
Internet makes use tax a worthwhile idea to discuss

By Bob Roper

In recent days, public officials have begun commenting on the possibility of bringing a use tax before the voters. It started when Hallsville Alderwoman Jane Alexander brought up the topic at a regular dinner hosted by the Boone County Commission for other municipal officials. At that same dinner, Presiding Commissioner Ken Pearson estimated the county is losing roughly $1 million per year of revenue by not having a use tax in place.

A few days later, at a regular Columbia City Council meeting, Mayor Darwin Hindman raised the issue. Other council representatives present seemed to be interested in at least looking at the issue. In addition, the city’s Finance Advisory and Audit Committee, a citizens committee, has been looking into the use tax as a possible revenue source.

The city and the county should, in fact, look at this. As Southern District Commissioner Karen Miller said, “We can’t keep going the way we are going. We have to make some changes.” The reasons are not hard to fathom:

Recent sales tax revenues have been plummeting. They are a major funder of local government services, and this downturn is causing huge problems for the city and county. The 2009 budget was difficult; the 2010 budget is very difficult; and the 2011 budget promises to be a potential catastrophe. My prediction is sales tax revenues for city and county will be down 3 percent to 5 percent for a long time.

The Big Enchilada, also known as the University of Missouri, is attracting more students, great athletic teams, etc. That will, of course, help, with more dollars coming to town. What it is not doing, and surely will not do in the future, is bringing in a lot of additional revenue from the state. The handwriting is on the wall, and that will adversely affect everything that happens in Columbia and Boone County.

Historically, consumer spending has always been 65 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP). At the height of the recent asset and financial bubble, that number went up to 70 percent. Now, with consumers changing their behavior to be more careful in their spending habits, that number has been greatly lowered. I think it will end up well below 65 percent of GDP, well short of the averages for the last 20 years. This will, of course, negatively affect sales tax revenues.

Columbia and Boone County, to be sure, have had much more success in attracting and expanding quality businesses and industries than a lot of our neighbors. But we are collectively well short of where we need to be. Thus, I do not predict a surge in economic growth in the city and county for some time and thus no substantial increase in the tax revenues. And we are less of a regional shopping destination than we used to be.
Finally, and this is the key point about the use tax, more and more people are purchasing products online or by telephone. Without a use tax, these sales do not pay the equivalent of local sales tax to the city or the county. I estimate sales that originate in this way, and thus pay no sales tax, amount to 10 percent to 15 percent of sales originating in the county.

Before I get heckled — and perhaps stoned — by my anti-tax friends, let’s look at the fairness of the current system. What is clearly unfair is to be a local retailer who would be taxed and, because of that, lose out to a seller via the Internet or telephone. Brick-and-mortar stores operating locally need to operate in the same environment from a competitive standpoint, and that is certainly not the case now.

The best solution is, of course, to have a global one, via Congress. Unfortunately, it looks like that is not going to happen anytime soon.

HOW WOULD A USE TAX ACTUALLY WORK?

It is called a “use tax” because out-of-state goods and materials come to Missouri and are “used” by the purchaser.

It is designed so that if the out-of-state seller has a facility or selling agency in Missouri, the vendor collects the local use tax. If the out-of-state vendor does not have a facility or selling agents in Missouri, the individual purchaser is required to pay the tax.

The tax only applies if the purchaser buys more than $2,000 in purchases in a calendar year. Thus, this tax will not apply to most people, but it will apply to a lot of companies that buy items from out of state. If something is exempt from sales taxes, it would also be exempt from the use tax.

A use tax cannot be imposed unless the people vote to do it. Columbia brought this to voters twice in the mid-1990s, and it failed both times.

In the current perilous economic climate, asking people to pass a use tax might be a big hill to climb. However, maybe it would not be so hard when people realize most folks do not spend $2,000 a year in out-of-state orders.

There is nothing unusual about passing a use tax. At last count, 38 counties have adopted it, including Cole County, where it added $527,877 in revenue last year. Likewise, many cities have adopted it over the years. For example, in Springfield, the heart of conservative southwest Missouri, use tax revenues are roughly 3 percent of the annual budget — about $3 million per year. The state imposes and collects a use tax.

It really gets down to how much in the way of government services our citizens want. As the draconian budgets come our way over the next two years, people will have to decide how much in the way of local government services they want. That is particularly true of Columbia, where parks, recreation and other popular programs and services could be on the cut list. Every program and service has some constituents who would hate to see it go the way of the dodo bird,
and perhaps that is when people will look with more favor at a use tax. It is a worthwhile idea to discuss now. I suggest the city and county consider forming a task force to review the idea.

THE E. COLI FIASCO

Everyone has heard about the E. coli issue at the Lake of the Ozarks, but let's start with a very simple question: What is E. coli, and should we be worried about it? The answer is that it is bacteria that can cause a flu-like sickness, and even death, in people infected through cuts or by swallowing water that contains it. So yes, we should be very concerned about it.

Here's the problem: E. coli tests at the Lake of the Ozarks from May to the present indicated that the level of E. coli was high enough to have closed certain beaches at least 11 times. Complex testing procedures are used at regular intervals to make the determinations as to when standards have been exceeded and citizen safety is at risk.

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources took samples from the lake at various locations on May 26. For some reason, those high results were not released to the public until late June, and no beaches were closed in the interim. Just how and why that happened is now being investigated by a Senate committee. As Sen. Howard Baker of Watergate fame once similarly asked: "What did you know, and when did you know it?"

The accounts to date are a hodgepodge of "he said/she said" narratives that clearly do not all square with each other, so hopefully the Senate committee can clear all that up. Personally, I most want to know why these results were not announced to the public. Some say that it is because of tourism concerns; others say they wanted to do more retesting and re-analysis. Hopefully, testimony under oath will do the trick.

I guess I have to admit I am a little short of astonished that DNR would not have released these findings back in late May. After all, it is part of their mission to serve the public with respect to important safety information such as this. Yes, sometimes there are judgment calls to be made, but if those findings were well above the standards — and people were at risk of getting sick — I say go public with the information. Looks to me like DNR has a lot of work to do in rebuilding trust and faith in its operation.

Tribune columnist Bob Roper is a former local banking and investment executive with a longstanding interest in public issues.
House for sale? A lot of money surrounds Rod Jetton's political consulting work

By JASON NOBLE and STEVE KRASKE
The Kansas City Star

His nickname is "The Rodfather."

When a Republican candidate in Missouri wants money, he hires Rod Jetton. When a corporation wants to defeat legislation, it hires Jetton.

And when big donors push big special interests, they know Jetton's friends can make lawmakers an offer they can't refuse.

Since he left the General Assembly as House speaker in 2008, Jetton has parlayed a natural gift for politics and eight years as a tough, tireless Republican Party leader into a profitable career as a consultant famous for behind-the-scenes maneuvering.

But the way the ex-Marine and former real estate salesman conducts political business has attracted the scrutiny of the FBI as it probes "pay for play" allegations in Jefferson City. Lawmakers are being investigated, too.

"Instead of being the guy himself — being the governor — he decided he wanted to become the puppet master," said Chris Benjamin, a former top aide to Jetton who has since become a Democrat.

The Kansas City Star interviewed dozens of lawmakers, lobbyists and political observers and reviewed thousands of pages of documents in recent months and found Jetton is one of the most powerful men influencing state government, despite not being an elected official.

The Star's investigation found:

• Jetton's clients have collected huge campaign donations after supporting legislation backed by wealthy Missourians. A vote in the House that tried to change how the state's judges are selected netted more than $250,000 in contributions for a Jetton client and for GOP campaign committees.

• Jetton has been operating at times, according to Republican and Democratic lawmakers, more like a lobbyist than a political consultant. Lobbyists are required to register with the Missouri Ethics Commission and publicly disclose their clients and gifts to lawmakers. A successful fight against utility rate legislation on behalf of one of his corporate clients netted $68,000 in fees for Jetton's consulting firm.

• Jetton's handling of campaign funds has drawn the attention of the Ethics Commission. A complaint obtained by The Star alleges that after he left office, Jetton illegally converted more than $24,000 in campaign money to personal use.

Jetton said that the money transfer was legal and that his critics' assessments of his power are overblown.

"I hear it all the time that I'm the 'Wizard of Oz' behind the curtain. I guess I should be flattered. Quite frankly ... I don't have any power. I can't kill a bill. I can't refer a bill," Jetton said. "If I have any power, it's because of one thing: I know how to run a campaign and win a race."

Bare-knuckles politics

Jetton, 42, served four terms in the House, rising from an unknown rural representative from southeast Missouri to speaker, the chamber's most powerful position.

But controversy dogged him during his political career. In 2004, he launched a consulting firm — Common Sense Conservative Consulting — and ran it throughout his tenure as speaker, taking on as clients the same lawmakers whose legislation depended on his blessing.

While the Ethics Commission called the arrangement legal, it expressed "serious concerns about the ability of an elected official to avoid violation of ... laws while conducting a consulting business for compensation."
When he was speaker, Jetton also oversaw the House Republican Campaign Committee, the political action committee that bankrolls candidates in close elections statewide.

He orchestrated the passage of legislation on how villages are incorporated, enraging his own party so much that more than two dozen fellow Republicans attempted to boot him from office.

And he did it all with a swagger, once heckling the then governor, Bob Holden, during a legislative address, and even keeping a second office in a bank-style vault on the Capitol's second floor.

But the continuing controversies — and his steady alienation of those within his own party — effectively ruled out a run at statewide office. So when Jetton was term-limited out of the House in 2008, he turned his attention full time to consulting.

Known for his bare-knuckles politics and boundless energy, Jetton has become a conduit for campaign contributions greasing the legislative gears in Jefferson City, The Star found.

From his office on High Street just blocks from the Capitol, Jetton now counts among his clients nearly the entire slate of House Republican leadership, key committee chairman and a handful of senators.

Among Jetton's clients is his handpicked successor to lead the Republican campaign committee, Rep. Steven Tilley.

Tilley, a Perryville Republican, is currently the House floor leader and was tapped last month as the Republicans' speaker-elect for the 2011 legislative session.

Jetton now works as a political consultant for Tilley, who has paid him more than $46,000 through the end of September, records show.

Tilley said that he's never sought advice from Jetton on legislative matters since Jetton left office and that their conversations deal strictly with political matters.

"There's never been a time that I can remember Rod coming to me and saying, 'I want to talk about a policy issue,' " Tilley said.

In the Senate, Jetton's clients include his Jefferson City roommate Sen. Jason Crowell, a Cape Girardeau Republican renowned for his willingness to single-handedly obstruct legislation to suit his own interests and those of his constituents.

Much of the concern over Jetton's growing influence stems from these intertwined personal and professional relationships. Some lawmakers worry about the potential for more special-interest legislation benefiting political backers aligned with Jetton's machine.

Former House member Brian Baker, a Belton Republican who left office this year, said he grew weary of that culture. Too many times, Baker said, he found himself facing votes on legislation aimed at advancing the pet causes of big donors.

"I hated it," he said. "It made me uncomfortable."

Jetton maintains that his critics are merely trying to discredit him in an effort to undermine his business and help his competitors.

"They've said this stuff about me for four or five years. I just keep doing it. I'm professional. I do what I'm supposed to do," Jetton said. "I work my candidates like dogs, just like I've worked."

Follow the money

Within days of a controversial vote last April in the Missouri House, rumors flew that a reward was coming for the Republican leaders who pushed it through.

And those rumors proved true. $25,000 poured in a week after the vote. Then $5,000. Then $50,000. Then $100,000, followed days later by another $25,000. And another $50,000.

The campaign contributions — more than $250,000 in all — came from an influential family, the Humphreys family of Joplin. The family held strong feelings about the issue at hand: changing the state's judicial selection process.

The amount of money and the timing stunned some lawmakers.


It's becoming a recurring pattern in Missouri politics, lawmakers said. Supporters of an issue bring a bill forward. The bill is defeated. Then supporters are encouraged to hire a political consultant or step up their campaign
contributions. When the next legislative session rolls around, the bill suddenly advances.

Campaign cash flowed freely following legislative action this spring on how the state's judges are picked, The Star's investigation found.

Judicial nominees for the state supreme and appeals courts, along with some larger circuit courts, are vetted by commissions made up of lawyers, gubernatorial appointees and a sitting judge. But conservatives have assailed the process, arguing that it gives too much influence to trial attorneys.

At the forefront of the fight has been the Humphreys family, owners of Joplin-based Tamko Building Products Inc. Tamko makes roofing products and other building materials. The company has been named in numerous asbestos lawsuits and boasts of a "very aggressive" litigation strategy.

Some companies believe that, through the political process, they can put judges on the bench who are more conservative and sympathetic to corporations.

Jetton and other House leaders have courted the Humphreys family for years. According to a Jetton confidant, who asked not to be identified, Jetton set a goal at the start of his reign as speaker to cultivate the Humphreys family first as $50,000 donors and then elevate the family to $100,000.

Jetton said he has met with David Humphreys twice over the years at his office in Joplin.

"I went down ... and explained what we were doing. And I said, 'If you like what you've seen, we need you to help us out,' " Jetton recalled. "And he was like, 'I like it. I'll help you.' "

But Jetton denied any involvement in the judicial reform bill.

Proposals to alter the judicial selection process have come and gone over the years, but it wasn't until this past April that one finally passed on an 85-72 vote in the House.

Suspicions arose almost immediately on both sides of the aisle. Several Republican lawmakers told The Star that their leadership held a series of closed-door meetings with freshman lawmakers and veterans who had voted against a similar bill in 2008.

"We got our asses chewed," said one lawmaker who was called before the speaker. The lawmaker asked not to be identified.

Tilley, who as floor leader directs legislation in the House, told lawmakers the bill's failure would be "unacceptable" and House Speaker Ron Richard bullied subordinates into supporting it, according to legislators' accounts and contemporaneous memos.

Richard represents the Humphreys family's hometown of Joplin. His spokeswoman, Kristen Blanchard, is the daughter of a Tamko executive.

Richard denied "twisting arms" and said he provided information about the bill only to lawmakers who asked for it. Tilley said party leaders did work to sway lawmakers on the issue, but he pointed out that "whipping" votes is a common legislative tactic.

"If it's a bill that's going to pass overwhelmingly, we never have to persuade anyone," Tilley said. "But if it's a bill that's going to be close, we bring them in and we certainly advocate our position."

Ultimately, 12 Republicans who voted "no" in 2008 supported the 2009 bill — enough to swing the final result — and the money started rolling in seven days later.

David and Debra Humphreys wrote a $25,000 check to Friends of Tilley, the floor leader's campaign committee.

Over the next several weeks, the Missouri Republican Party received $50,000 from David Humphreys. Humphreys gave $100,000 to the House Republican Campaign Committee, the fundraising PAC controlled by Tilley. And Humphreys' mother, Ethel Mae, gave $25,000 to the House Republican Campaign Committee — even though the bill had already died in the Senate when the General Assembly adjourned in mid-May.

The family provided for Richard as well, doling out contributions totaling $55,000 between May and August.

Donations on that scale are legal in Missouri — as long as they aren't explicitly tied to the progress of legislation. Federal law prohibits lawmakers from accepting "anything of value" in exchange for legislative action.

But Rep. Brian Yates, a Lee's Summit Republican who sponsored a major ethics bill last session that was defeated, said the contributions raise serious questions.

"That amount of money being contributed that close to the vote is concerning," Yates said. "People can draw their
own conclusions."

Democrats already have.

"There's $250,000 for that vote," said Rep. Trent Skaggs of North Kansas City. The Humphreys family "paid for the vote. It's unbelievable."

Tilley, however, denied any link between the contributions and the vote.

"I can tell you with 100 percent certainty that myself or my caucus didn't move the bill as a result of donations," Tilley said. "That's absolutely untrue."

David Humphreys and other family members did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Richard acknowledged the Humphreys family's interest in the court plan, but he pointed out that the family's donations didn't ensure its passage in the Senate, which, as expected, let the measure die.

"I doubt he's (Humphreys) too proud of that," Richard said.

Consultant or lobbyist?

In early morning workouts, Jetton sometimes runs the statehouse steps, but he is rarely seen inside its halls.

Yet, critics complain, he's still pulling legislative strings.

"Jetton should register as a lobbyist," said Rep. Jim Viebrock of Republic, a fellow Republican. "The language in the ethics law is clear enough that some of his activities require him to become a lobbyist."

Without registering as a lobbyist, he is free to operate without making public disclosures. Jetton, however, maintains he's not a lobbyist in any way.

"You have to register when you lobby them (lawmakers) to vote this way or that way," he said. "I don't do that. Nobody pays me to go tell a legislator how to vote."

But Jetton's involvement in a legislative fight this spring, The Star found, illustrates why some of his critics are convinced he's operating as a lobbyist.

AmerenUE, an electric utility serving St. Louis and much of eastern Missouri, wanted lawmakers to allow the utility to charge customers the costs of building a nuclear power plant before it began generating electricity.

Opposition quickly arose across the political spectrum. But rising above the din were objections from Noranda Aluminum Inc., a metal smelter in the state's Bootheel and one of AmerenUE's biggest customers.

To make its message heard, Noranda hired Jetton.

On March 24, as the debate escalated, records show a campaign committee was formed under the name Missourians Against Higher Utility Rates. Its treasurer and deputy treasurer were two of Jetton's employees. Its mailing address was Rod Jetton & Associates' Jefferson City office.

On April 3, the committee's one — and only — contribution rolled in: a $78,570 check from Noranda Aluminum. The same day, the committee reported $44,550 in expenses to CCC LLC — an abbreviation for Common Sense Conservative Consulting, the legal name of Jetton's firm.

Within a week, the committee paid $10,231 to an Ohio consultant specializing in "robocalls" and $23,593 more to Jetton's firm. In all, more than $68,000 flowed from Noranda to Jetton.

By April 11, the campaign committee had just $184.21 in the bank. So what did Noranda buy?

Elderly residents of Columbia began receiving mailings and recorded messages on their phones warning them of spiraling utility rates — even though Columbia doesn't get its electricity from AmerenUE.

In reality, Jetton's efforts were aimed at Sen. Kurt Schaefer, a Republican whose district includes Columbia and who had taken the lead on drafting the legislation.

"The effort that was launched against me specifically and in my district was not, in my opinion, for informational purposes on the bill," Schaefer said.

Julie Allen, executive director of the Missouri Ethics Commission, said committees such as Missourians Against Higher Utility Rates have wide latitude to accept donations and reach out to voters.

"In general terms, the statute says they can use contributions to influence or attempt to influence the actions of voters," Allen said.
Outraged, Schaefer took his grievances to the Senate floor, where he tangled with Crowell.

Crowell was Jetton’s first consulting client and still makes quarterly payments to his firm. Indeed, in 2008, Crowell paid more than $60,000 to Rod Jetton & Associates — nearly one-third of the money Crowell raised for an easy Senate re-election campaign.

Crowell, whose district is within AmerenUE’s service area, had led the legislative fight opposing the bill, at one point orchestrating a 10-hour filibuster against it. But Crowell denied doing anything on Jetton’s behalf and took offense at suggestions otherwise.

“I won’t be intimidated by being called crooked,” he said in comments to the media at the time.

In an interview last week with The Star, Crowell again said: “Rod Jetton did not lobby me on this issue in any way, shape or form.”

In the days following Noranda’s campaign, the bill made little progress. By April 22, AmerenUE and its allies gave up.

Lawmakers who watched the drama unfold said Jetton’s work for Noranda demonstrated that he had crossed the line into lobbying.

Skaggs also said there was little doubt that Jetton should be a registered lobbyist.

“He’s in the halls. I’ve seen him talking to people,” the North Kansas City Democrat said. “He should be (registered) because he obviously is making requests on behalf of legislation.”

Dave Levinthal, a spokesman for the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan group that promotes open government, said Jetton appeared to be taking advantage of weak ethics laws.

“It allows for former lawmakers or anyone lobbying to basically operate under a veil and not have to disclose what they may be doing with some of their former colleagues and friends,” Levinthal said, adding that it’s not in the public’s best interests.

He added: “We would advocate transparency in all of its forms to the greatest degree possible.”

Whether he’s a lobbyist or not, political consulting can be almost as lucrative. As a “part-time” lawmaker, Jetton earned $33,851. Now he makes much more.

By just one measure — fees paid to his firm by candidates and publicly disclosed in campaign finance reports — Jetton grossed more than $200,000 in 2008. Through the first nine months of 2009, a non-election year, Jetton’s firm was paid more than $164,000.

That doesn’t reflect business expenses or revenue from other sources.

Growing Influence

Jetton’s growing influence as a political consultant in Jefferson City, many lawmakers contend, is a result of two relatively new realities in state politics: term limits and unlimited campaign contributions.

Enacted in the 1990s, the term limit laws restrict legislators to eight years in the House and eight in the Senate. But the laws’ full effects are only now being felt in the Capitol.

“If you’re a political animal, you’re already setting your sights on something else instead of really focusing on your job and doing the work for your constituents,” said Rep. Patrick Naeger, a Perryville Republican who termed out in 2002.

That steep climb, observers said, only enhances the power of consultants such as Jetton, who can quickly provide the connections and money that young lawmakers need to succeed.

“Out of necessity, they’re going to seek the advice of a pro who has those connections,” said Sen. Luann Ridgeway, a Smithville Republican and a Jetton client.

Limits on contributions were thrown out last year in hopes that more transparency would be brought to the political process. But that flooded Missouri’s political system with even more money.

Before the removal of limits, the most someone could contribute to a statewide candidate was $1,350. Now donations of $25,000 or $50,000 are not unusual. In the heat of the 2008 campaign, even six-figure donations were routine, and at least one contribution to a statewide candidate topped $1 million.

All the concerns about the link between campaign donations and legislative action have some lawmakers recalling corruption probes when the Democrats dominated the General Assembly in the 1980s and ‘90s.

http://www.kansascity.com/772/v-print/story/1513951.html
Bob Griffin, the longest-serving House speaker in Missouri history, went to prison in 1997 after pleading guilty to violating federal bribery laws.

"I don't know how much different this is from the Griffin days," said Sen. Delbert Scott, a Lowry City Republican first elected in 1985.

**Ongoing investigations**

Earlier this month, Mayor Len Pagano of St. Peters, Mo., told The Star that he contacted the FBI with concerns about the legality of legislation passed under Jetton's House leadership in 2005.

The bill specifically targeted the St. Louis suburb, prohibiting it from collecting revenues from a voter-approved 5 percent hotel tax.

Critics such as Pagano contend it's another example of special-interest legislation, since one of the backers of the legislation was the head of the Drury Inn hotel chain. Only weeks after the vote, the Drury company contributed a total of about $15,000 to the House Republican Campaign Committee headed by Jetton.

Charles Drury Sr., chairman of the board of Drury Development Corp., said he knew nothing about the donations.

"Never in my life have I given one dollar to any politician, any politician, with the belief I should get anything back in the form of other than what they should do, which should be 100 percent honest for every citizen in America," Drury said.

In his conversation with FBI agents, Pagano said, they acknowledged an investigation looking specifically at Jetton.

A spokesperson for the FBI would neither confirm nor deny the existence of any investigation. But lawmakers earlier had told The Star that Jetton was among several the FBI was scrutinizing involving pay-for-play allegations, where legislation is tied to campaign donations.

Meanwhile, the Missouri Ethics Commission is investigating whether Jetton used campaign funds for private purposes.

According to the complaint, Jetton in late 2007 closed one campaign committee and transferred $24,143 from it into a new committee — the Speaker Jetton Leadership Fund — formed on the same day, then used the money to pay employees and business expenses at his consulting firm. The Leadership Fund was "terminated" by Jetton's staff on Oct. 2.

"The use of campaign funds to offset employee expenses for a consulting business clearly constitutes a conversion of contributions, which are prohibited," the complaint states.

The document obtained by The Star includes only a statement of facts, but it does not show who filed it or the date it was submitted.

The Ethics Commission does not comment on complaints or acknowledge the status of pending investigations. No action concerning Jetton has been recorded in commission proceedings.

Jetton maintains that he has done nothing wrong. He also insists he has no knowledge of an FBI inquiry.

For now, the country boy who fashioned himself politically after one-time U.S. Senate majority leader and former president Lyndon B. Johnson continues to do his consulting work just a short jog from the Capitol.

LBJ, Jetton said, taught him that money and pulling strings aren't what's important in government.

"People are really what makes politics work," Jetton said. "You got to get to know the people."

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• Businessman’s donations have taken Jefferson City by storm.

• How Missouri can clean up its politics.

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