Missouri budget woes

Times like these try public spenders

By Henry J. Waters III

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When revenues are scarce, public budget makers are forced to get real. Or go crazy.

This awkward phenomenon is showing up in state budgets for public education at all levels. Gov. Jay Nixon has done his best to preserve funding, but the road ahead narrows. As federal stimulus money runs out and local revenue fails to keep pace, lawmakers and state education officials talk openly of dire consequences.

Nixon proposes an amount in next year’s budget for K-12 education that falls some $87 million below legal school foundation formula requirements. Moreover, the governor’s revenue projection depends on an extension of $300 million in federal stimulus funds, as yet unapproved, and hoped-for increases in state revenue, by no means certain. Sen. Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, worries the state could be sued for failing to keep up.

Officials cite similar worries for higher education, where recent agreements between the governor and public higher education officials are in jeopardy. Institutions have agreed to hold the line on tuition increases in exchange for minimal reductions in state appropriations, but by 2011 revenue projections are so poor the state side of the bargain might not be kept, raising dire talk about budget impossibilities.

Rep. Chris Kelly and others openly revisit a fact kept out of the discussion when revenues are stronger: that Missouri has too many institutions of public higher education to fund properly. Deputy Commissioner of Higher Education Paul Wagner figures that by the end of fiscal year 2011, higher education might be short about $250 million, requiring closure of all state institutions except the University of Missouri System to “make that up.”

Wagner was trying to demonstrate the difficulty of the budget situation. Nobody in the General Assembly contemplates even remotely closing a single one of the colleges or universities, an act of political “suicide.”

So, if the state can’t rationalize higher education funding in times like this, when will it ever do so? Never, one might suggest, meaning the state is destined to eternally underfund higher education, particularly its flagship campus.
Even when revenue is relatively robust, state funding still is marginal compared with states providing substantially higher funding for premier campuses. Please think of schools in the Big 10 and on the West Coast.

Despite this relative difficulty, MU retains a surprisingly strong position, particularly for the diversity of major programming on campus. Very few universities in America have schools of medicine, veterinary science, agriculture, engineering, business, a nuclear reactor and programs in life sciences — plus a comprehensive array of liberal arts offerings.

Of course, the UM System and MU in particular might use its millions more effectively. Sprawling bureaucracies are not constituted for focused prioritizing, avoidance of waste and efficient processes. But even so, the next few years are likely to put the squeeze on education budgets unless lawmakers do something even more unthinkable in most of their minds: raise taxes.

Meanwhile, the best hope for their capital budgets is Kelly’s proposed statewide bond issue, which should include substantial funding for the new building for the State Historical Society, itself an institution of importance statewide and beyond.

HJW III

Only the mediocre are always at their best.
The MU Police Department is continuing to investigate previous University Bookstore employee Johnny Warnke, who was arrested on suspicion of stealing several thousand dollars from the store.

Warnke was arrested last Friday for thefts between Jan. 18 and Jan. 21.

MUPD Capt. Scott Richardson said fellow bookstore employees reported Warnke to the police after reviewing store records. Police are still studying the case and are investigating whether he stole money on previous occasions.

"He was arrested on actions that occurred between those days," Richardson said. "The investigation is ongoing to review the whole time he has worked there and look at receipts and records."

According to a probable cause statement report completed by MUPD Officer Todd E. Henderson, the bookstore might add more charges after further investigation.

There are additional discrepancies the University Bookstore is still investigating, and there might be additional charges or counts sought in the near future, the report stated.

Reportedly, Warnke was accessing the store's electronic receipt file to conduct electronic returns. He then added the credit of the returns to his own bank accounts.

The report stated on one occasion he credited $6,603.58 to his account and credited $2,467.58 on another.
At the time of questioning and arrest, Warnke was reportedly in possession of $6,610.00 in cash. He was repentant and willing to return money to the store, the report stated.

He admitted he had in fact credited his personal bank accounts, Henderson said in the report. Warnke said he felt guilty about taking the money and was attempting to return the $6,603.58 to the University Bookstore.

The report stated that Warnke's money was not accepted by the bookstore.

MUPD Captain Brian Weimer said the case would remain closed to the public until Warnke goes on trial. According to the report, there is speculation Warnke might go to Ohio to avoid prosecution. Warnke has family in Ohio and was imprisoned there for six months on similar charges.
WASHINGTON - The highly lucrative market for radioactive isotopes used in cancer scans and other medical procedures is at the center of a political struggle in Congress, where a Republican senator is blocking a measure backed by, among others, a majority of Democrats and Republicans and a large imaging supplier in Massachusetts.

The tussle is over the uncertain future of a $4 billion market now controlled by foreign suppliers with aging nuclear reactors, said Representative Edward J. Markey, a Malden Democrat.

His bill, which the House overwhelmingly passed and the White House supports, would require the Department of Energy to provide at least $130 million to encourage the creation of domestic manufacturers of the special compounds.

It would also phase out the use of highly enriched uranium to manufacture the isotopes in an effort to prevent the raw material - which could also be used to make a weapon - from falling into the wrong hands, Markey said.

However, the bipartisan effort - it also has the support of a wide range of pharmaceutical companies and medical institutions - is held up in the Senate, where Senator Christopher Bond, Republican of Missouri, is demanding more information, including how the federal funding would be spread among companies, universities, and the private nuclear reactors that would be needed to manufacture the compound.

The proposed changes could have a major impact on the leading companies now selling medical isotopes in the United States, including Lantheus Medical Imaging of Billerica (formerly Bristol-Myers Squibb Medical Imaging) and Covidien Medical Imaging, a unit of the Mansfield health care products company Covidien.

Both companies have said they support Markey's bill, even as Bond raises concerns about the future of the industry.

Bond said he wants to be sure the proposal does not drive up costs or increase the chances of shortages as the shift is made away from the international market and a new supply chain is created.

Specialists say they suspect, however, that the move is also about ensuring Covidien is a beneficiary of the new federal money.
"It is a lucrative industry," said Edwin Lyman, the senior staff scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists who has tracked the issue for nearly a decade. "Actual production cost is small compared to the cost of the treatment. There is a substantial profit margin."

The isotope molybdenum-99, is used to treat a variety of ailments, including non-Hodgkin lymphoma and thyroid cancer. The isotope is also used to scan bones, evaluate kidney function, and diagnose heart conditions, with each treatment costing several thousand dollars.

But the current global supply - half of which is estimated to be used by US patients - is in jeopardy, prompting Markey to quickly push the bill through the House last year.

Aging foreign nuclear reactors using the raw material provided by the United States now produce the bulk of the isotope, but a Canadian reactor has been temporarily shut down, while a Dutch facility is set to go offline next month.

Kevin D. Crowley, director of the Nuclear and Radiation Studies Board at the National Research Council, told the Senate energy panel last month that shortages are expected to worsen, as domestic demand grows at rates of 3 to 5 percent per year over the next five years, in part due to the aging US population.

But in a letter last month to the leaders of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee - amounting to a temporary hold on the bill - Bond said he wants more details on how the Department of Energy would decide where to invest the $130 million sought in Markey's bill.

"I am unaware of any type of comprehensive planning or documentation that describes in detail exactly who is expected to supply medical isotopes in sufficient quantities to meet the needs of US medical patients without disruption," Bond wrote, adding that issues such as funding and facilities need to be addressed.

Covidien and other isotope suppliers hope to receive the federal seed money to establish a domestic manufacturing base for molybdenum-99.

The company recently reached an agreement with Babcock & Wilcox Co., based in Virginia, to build a reactor that can manufacture the isotope. Meanwhile, the University of Missouri at Columbia has also proposed producing the isotope in its research reactor.

Lantheus Medical Imaging, meanwhile, is one of Covidien's primary competitors. The company's vice president, Michael Duffy, told Congress that to bolster its supply of the isotope it has entered into a partnership with Nuclear Energy Corp. of South Africa. But that is seen as a short-term solution.

"Lantheus continues to work diligently with all potential sources to improve the long-term supply outlook," the company said in a Dec. 30 letter to customers.

As a stopgap measure to address immediate shortages in supply, the Department of Energy recently agreed to help fund efforts by General Electric and Babcock & Wilcox to produce the isotope.
The Markey bill would also require domestic suppliers to use "low-enriched" uranium for isotopes, phasing out the use of the highly enriched uranium - which can be fashioned into weapons. Arms control specialists have long urged replacing highly enriched material with the safer form to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons materials.

"This 1950s-era policy simply does not work in a post-9/11 world," Markey said of the current reliance on highly enriched uranium.

But Bond has also raised objections to the bill's deadline of 11 years for cutting off shipments of the raw material overseas, which he said could lead to shortages if domestic production capacity is not ready to fill the gap. Bond's office said he was not available for an interview.

Markey remains confident that the impasse can be broken.

"There is a crisis in nuclear medicine in America, and we have to solve this problem," he said. If the bill is adopted, "we save lives, help create an industry, and further the nonproliferation goals of our country."

Bryan Bender can be reached at bender@globe.com.
School closes the gap

Six years ago, former Columbia Public Schools Superintendent Phyllis Chase put a “model school” label on West Boulevard Elementary and its poor-achieving, high-minority student population.

Since 2006, state testing scores in math and communication arts have increased more at West than at any other elementary in the district. Gaps between groups of students there have shrunk as well, leading the University of Missouri’s Martin Luther King Jr. Committee last night to honor West Boulevard and its current principal, Peter Stiepleman.

“These successes have everything to do with the patience our community has shown,” Stiepleman said after receiving the award from last year’s recipient, Almeta Crayton, Columbia’s first black city councilwoman. “They want results from their investments, and they’re starting to see them.”

About 300 people attended MU’s annual Martin Luther King Jr. Lecture at Memorial Union’s Stotler Lounge. Workers rolled in extra rows of chairs to accommodate the crowd who came to hear guest speaker Patricia Williams, a Columbia University law professor, discuss the achievement gap.

Williams said the achievement disparity people often focus on — between black students and white students — has little to do with the gap we should be worried about: between the U.S. students and the students of the industrial world. “We Americans don’t value education,” she told the crowd.

But the achievement gap between blacks and whites was the subject when Chase put a focus on West Boulevard.

Teachers received extra stipends to discuss what worked in the classroom. Staff also received special tutelage from outside school professionals.

“It was a powerful statement to say it was no longer acceptable to underperform as it had,” Stiepleman said last night.

This year, 45.8 percent of the school’s black students scored proficient, advanced or reached their growth mark set by the state on the communication arts section of the Missouri Assessment Program tests, which are used to see if schools meet goals set by the federal government.

Fifty percent of the school’s white students reached the same achievement level at West Boulevard. The school has a student population that is 55.6 percent black.
Budget cuts the past two years slashed the stipends for West Boulevard and purged extra professional development that teachers received because of the model-school designation.

The school is nearly aligned with every other elementary school now, Stiepleman said last night. Yet the culture that has produced better results remains, he said, and that has him optimistic improvements will continue without extra funding.

"The vision is still there," Stiepleman said, "and the training is still there and the people are still there."

Reach Jonathon Braden at 573-815-1711 or e-mail ibraden@columbiatribune.com.
MSA approves Tiger Watch

A neighborhood watch and crosswalk were proposed to improve campus safety.

By Megan Pearl  
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The Missouri Students Association Senate approved two pieces of legislation to improve campus safety this week.

"They both have roots in early last semester and they're now beginning to take form in legislation," Operations Committee Chairman Evan Wood said.

The legislation advocates the creation of a crosswalk on College Avenue and the creation of an ad hoc committee, creating a pilot program of Tiger Watch.

Tiger Watch, an ad hoc committee created by sophomore Josh Travis, aims to be a student run campus safety committee, which will be fully functional by fall 2010.

The crosswalk is in response to the six pedestrian-vehicle accidents that have occurred since 2006 on College Avenue between University Avenue and Rollins Road.

"There are pedestrians everywhere in the road during the day and stopping in the turn lane, so you can see why a lot of people get hit there," Wood said. "We want to eliminate or at least significantly decrease the number of traffic accidents there."

MSA had been considering a bridge or tunnel to make crossing the street easier, Wood said.

Mayor Darwin Hindman said in a meeting with MSA President Tim Noce he felt the project was too expensive considering students have never used them much in the past. The legislation shows student support for the crosswalk and transitively increases the chances of implementation by the city of Columbia.

Committee members hope to decrease crime rates around the more secluded, less traveled areas of campus.
"Personally, I often feel very uncomfortable walking through campus at night, especially from the library back to the sorority house, and I wanted to improve campus safety," Student Affairs Committee Chairwoman Michelle Horan said.

Travis said he pitched the idea to the MSA committees last semester. Travis and Horan aim to make it a part of MSA like STRIPES, the Wellness Resource Center and the Craft Studio.

As a part of the unfunded pilot for this semester, the committee itself will zone the campus. Zoning entails deciding where and how large the zones will be and what days of the week and time of night the committee should operate, Horan said. Eventually, the program could take the shape of the Safe Walk Home program that operates at other universities.

"We want to make sure we're building a program that works," Travis said. "My main concern is that we are not creating a program that is a secret police."

The committee will also be training with the MU Police Department and have a chance to go on patrol with them to get an idea of what their zones are now.

Travis said they aim to plan with residence halls and Greektown in a way that goes beyond installing cameras and blue lights.

We want to create a community that is more actively engaged in campus safety through the program, Travis said.

"We want signage to say this is a 'Tiger Watch Area' to deter the crime, like a neighborhood watch," Horan said.