Nixon enlists help to curb tax credits

Forsee among those on board.

By Terry Ganey

JEFFERSON CITY — University of Missouri System President Gary Forsee stood beside Gov. Jay Nixon yesterday and endorsed the governor’s call for an overhaul of the state’s tax credit system, which they say is siphoning hundreds of millions of dollars from the state treasury at a time of economic hardship.

Forsee said Missouri had reached a “tipping point” because tax credit spending had grown 2½ times during the same decade that spending for higher education had been flat.

“We have had a decade of underfunding the requirements we have to provide high-quality public education for Missourians,” Forsee said. Although Forsee did not endorse Nixon’s specific tax credit rollback proposal, he said it was time for the General Assembly to tackle the issue of tax credit reform so some funds could be used elsewhere.

Forsee was among some 70 educators, from universities and K-12 public schools, called on by Nixon to encourage the legislature to reduce tax credit spending before the session adjourns May 14. The governor singled out the two biggest tax credit programs for criticism — the historic preservation program, which cost the state $186 million last year, and the low-income housing program, which cost $106 million.

Tax credit expenditures totaled $585 million last year. Nixon has asked lawmakers to cut the state budget by about $500 million this year to bring expenditures in line with revenues.

“Tax credits can be a valuable tool to create jobs and grow our economy, but they must be weighed against their cost to our classrooms, our colleges and other vital state services,” Nixon said. “It’s a choice, and it’s time to make the choice in favor of ratcheting back some of the uncontrolled expenditures in this area in a rational way that will allow us to create jobs but also fund what is the key job driver in our state — a solid and improving world-class educational system.”

Nixon has proposed cutting tax credit expenditures back to 70 percent of the amount redeemed last year, or about $314 million.

Although some senators have seemed receptive, House leaders pronounced it dead.
“I’m not about to take the governor’s proposal,” said House Speaker Ron Richard, R-Joplin. Majority Leader Steve Tilley, R-Perryville, said it was a “horrible idea” and that educators had become Nixon’s “props and pawns.”

“If education decides that they want to help us with reforms on tax credits, I assume they would have come to us before now, but as of today, I haven’t seen any of that help,” Richard said.

Nixon’s plan would put the Department of Economic Development in control of how the credits are distributed, something House leaders called a “power grab.” And they pointed out that while a member of the Missouri Housing Development Commission for 16 years as attorney general, Nixon had authorized hundreds of millions of dollars worth of tax credits.

Reach Terry Ganey at 573-815-1708 or e-mail tganey@columbiatribune.com.
JEFFERSON CITY — The Missouri House passed legislation Thursday that would eventually give students at public and private colleges the same amount of money for state scholarships.

The legislation also would lower the grade-point average required to receive the Access Missouri scholarship during the first two years of college. The Access Missouri program is the state’s primary need-based scholarship.

The House passed the bill 145-10, sending it to the Senate.

Sponsoring Rep. Mike Thomson, R-Maryville, said changes are needed to the program’s GPA requirements because some students lose their scholarships while they are struggling with the transition to college life.

Under the legislation, students would need to maintain a 2.0 GPA for the first two years of school and a 2.5 GPA for the remaining years. The state currently requires a 2.5 GPA for all four years.

Thomson said up to 1,700 students could renew their scholarship next school year because of the GPA change.

Access Missouri scholarships for students at private colleges currently are almost twice as large as those given to students at public universities. The program provides up to $4,600 a year to students at private higher education institutions and $2,150 a year to students at state universities.
The differences are meant to account for the higher tuition charged by private institutions and state money appropriated to public universities.

The bill would provide scholarships for students at all four-year institutions — both public and private — at $2,850 a year beginning in 2014. A similar measure is being considered in the Senate.

Students from private colleges have lobbied the legislature against the proposed change in scholarship amounts. Some lawmakers said Thursday that private school students need more scholarship money because the state appropriates taxpayer money to public schools.

"They're already getting state support before they apply for a scholarship, before they pay for tuition," said Rep. Tim Flook, R-Liberty.

Thomson said some of the concerns about the bill stemmed from the perception that private school students would receive less funding.

"It's still going to be the same number of students, but now when they get approved, if they choose to stay in Missouri, they'll get an equal amount wherever they decide to go," Thomson said.
Mizzou Advantage leaders plan their initiatives

The new initiative hopes to unite MU with other institutions.

By Ethan Simonds
Published April 23, 2010

The Mizzou Advantage facilitators, named April 15, have begun working out plans for the specific initiatives each will be overseeing.

Human Environmental Sciences Associate Dean Jo Britt-Rankin, who will be in charge of Mizzou Advantage's food for the future initiative, said the program is a good way for different departments within MU to work together.

"We are looking to link faculty across campus and to build on the current strengths we have within this campus," she said.

Britt-Rankin will begin bringing in speakers to get her initiative moving.

"Beginning next fall, we will be starting a food and society lecture series, as well as a food, fuel and society networking proposal," she said.

Britt-Rankin said they want to begin looking at what MU can do for private producers, whether it is in food biosecurity, food safety or animal and plant genetics.

Journalism professor Charles Davis, head of the media of the future emphasis, said the program would help various departments across campus see how similar some of their pursuits are.

"We want to break down the walls between the departments and schools and work together to try to get an idea of what we're all doing," Davis said.

Media of the future will be working with groups around campus to talk about how ways new media technology will affect people. "We're not only going to look at the technologies themselves, but we're also going to look at the cultural, social and economic effects of those technologies," Davis said.

Davis said they're rethinking the university in a fundamental way.

"I can't tell you how excited I am about the potential of this program," Davis said.

Veterinarian oncology professor Carolyn Henry will lead the one health, one medicine initiative. She said the program could set MU apart from other universities.
"This is a great way for us to make Mizzou stand out from other colleges and universities by picking areas where we have advantages over other sites," Henry said. "It will help us attract new students and faculty."

She said her area could unify not only the medical departments at MU but also some outside the campus.

"We'd like to have a multidisciplinary approach to making advances in medicine, as well as reaching out to other industries and universities," Henry said. "This will help add a creative approach to our degree programs."

Henry said her first goal will be making sure she knows what's going on around campus so she can better link people to work together.

"I've got several meetings set up to try to bring together different groups on campus to see what research we have and to see what we could be partnering on," Henry said.

One partner that could already be in place to work with MU is the Kansas City Area Life Sciences Institute, Henry said.

"We've already got links with that group, and we're interested in building up relations along the I-70 corridor," she said. "That could extend as far east as Kansas State and as far west as the University of Missouri-St. Louis."
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

MU tests mass notification system

By Katelyn Amen
April 22, 2010 | 4:37 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — A test of MU’s mass notification system went according to plan Thursday afternoon.

"It did exactly as it was designed," said Terry Robb, spokesman for the MU Division of Information Technology.

MU students, faculty and staff who signed up for the mass notification system received the texts. Robb said people should have received three separate messages.

He sent the first text at 2:50 p.m. but thought there was an error and stopped it. The system worked quickly, so most users received the text. He said the system is guaranteed to send 40,000 text messages within an hour, but the first text seemed to have gone through within a few minutes.

He sent the second round of texts, which went through twice, at 2:53 p.m.

Text users were asked to respond "YES" to the text to confirm they got the notification. Texts should stop after a user sends a confirmation, but Robb said most had little chance to respond to the first message because of how fast the texts came.

As of 4:30 p.m. Thursday, Robb had received 12,103 confirmations and 527 late confirmations out of the 22,810 users receiving notifications.

This was the second test of the mass notification system. The first was in November 2008, Robb said.
DolT tests emergency alert system

About half the people texted responded within the hour.

By Zach Toombs
Published April 23, 2010

The Division of Information Technology texted students, faculty and staff Thursday to test MU's emergency mass notification system. Students received three of these messages as a result of an error from DolT.

MU tested its emergency mass notification system at 2:50 p.m. Thursday, sending text messages to students, faculty and staff who had registered their cell phone numbers with the system.

Division of Information Technology Director Terry Robb said the emergency notification system sent texts to 22,810 recipients, 12,103 of whom confirmed the message within an hour. The fraction of people who replied before 3:50 p.m. translated to 53 percent, meeting DolT's goal of a 50 percent response rate.

Robb said the number of confirmations within the first hour of the test is the key statistic, but DolT had received 527 late responses by approximately 4:30 p.m.

"It's a one-hour test, but the number of confirmations will grow as people confirm throughout the night," Robb said.

Students, faculty and staff who had registered with the emergency notification system received three texts, rather than one, as a result of an error from DolT, Robb said.

"When I started the alert I got a response from the vendor that made it look like the message wasn't sending to all students, so I stopped the alert," Robb said. "When I started sending another alert, two were accidentally sent. It was just an error on my part."

MU implemented the emergency mass notification system in November 2007. In the event of an emergency, the system would activate a sequence of alerts. The first would be a text message sent to student, faculty and staff cell phones. The second alert would be an e-mail.

Thursday's test specifically focused on the text message portion, though the e-mail alert would work similarly, giving students a confirmation hyperlink.

MU spokesman Christian Basi said the university's goal is to test the text message alert once a semester.

"That is the plan for right now, but that may change," Basi said. "We're trying, though, to make this a regular thing."
The alert system is provided by the National Notification Network, with which the university has held a contract since August 2007. The system allows certain organizations, including the MU Police Department, Campus Facilities, the MU News Bureau, Environmental Health and Safety and DoIT, to phone into the system and activate the alert.

Students can register their cell phone and e-mail contact information with the emergency notification system through their myZou accounts.
Drain of state funds may leave schools beached as privates

By MARÁ ROSE WILLIAMS

At the rate state funds for higher education are dwindling, Kansas State University President Kirk Schulz says, his school could be completely privately funded within two decades.

If the trend continues, Schulz told The Star this week that he fully expects his university, although still called a “public school,” to actually be operating on tuition dollars, grants and money from donors.

“Unfortunately, I’d say he is right on target,” agreed Daniel Hurley director of state relations and policy analysis for the American Association of State Colleges.

“If he had said three years or five years, I’d say no. But 20 is not beyond the realm of possibility especially for large public schools with high enrollments and big endowments like a K-State.”

Hurley said talk about public schools going private surfaces every so often when state support slides significantly. Several years ago when state money fell off at public universities in Colorado, Massachusetts Virginia and North Carolina, those schools considered moves towards fiscal independence.

“It is a terrible place for public higher education to be in,” Schulz said during his Kansas City visit. “We need to count on having our institution maintained with some reasonable amount of public support.”

Currently the state provides 22 percent of the K-State budget. Ten years ago it was 42 percent, Shultz said. At the University of Kansas, state support accounts for 26 percent of the operating budget, nearly three fourths comes from tuition, grants and endowment.

University of Missouri gets 35 percent of its operating budget from the state. Nearly half comes from tuition and fees.

With the economy slow to recover from the recession and state revenues gutted across the country, lawmakers continue shaving funds from higher education and other areas to fill budget holes.
Last year at least 39 states cut such assistance, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Missouri lawmakers have managed to maintain an agreement not to cut funding below 2009 levels in exchange for schools not raising tuition for in-state undergraduates.

In the past year, Kansas institutions absorbed 13 percent cuts, dropping to 2006 funding levels, costing jobs and programs among the six regents-led universities, some of which have considered enrollment caps. Students have seen hefty tuition hikes, said Regent President Jill Docking.

Relief is not likely to come soon. Currently Kansas is facing about a $500 million shortfall and Schulz and other university leaders are supporting sale tax increases to boost the state’s revenue stream.

Docking has said it could take a decade to recover.

“These are very uncertain times,” said Dan Anderson, KU interim provost. “And what may happen 20 years down the road. I don’t know.”
Council discusses results of employee benefits survey

Faculty addressed possibilities for MU's low engagement score.

By Mary Novokhovsky
Published April 23, 2010

Thursday's Faculty Council meeting addressed several topics brought up at the UM system Board of Curators meeting last Thursday and Friday.

The majority of the council's discussion revolved around the results of a benefits survey taken by 7,000 faculty and staff within the UM system.

The survey's results showed MU had a low engagement score in relation to other UM campuses. The engagement score is an assessment of faculty and staff responses to questions about their working environment.

"We scored really low when it came to saying 'MU encourages me to do my best work,'" Faculty Council Chairwoman Rubin said.

Several Faculty Council members offered their own explanations for the low engagement score.

Economics professor Xiaoguang Ni said one reason for the possible negative feedback surrounding staff and faculty motivation was the lack of incentives. Ni said the administration is not bringing forward ideas for incentives, and instead faculty and staff are predominantly faced with the prospect of cuts.

"The university should help us to help the university," Ni said. "From my standpoint, I have personally experienced that not all is done to encourage people to bring more resources to the university."

Journalism professor Clyde Bentley said another possible factor in the low score could be the minimal faculty input when it comes to the creation of curriculum.

"One of the places we were supposed to have a strong input on is curriculum," Bentley said. "It has not been easy to modify curriculum."

Another complaint revolving around the survey and administration in general was the lack of representation among minority communities. Black Studies Program Assistant Director April Langley said issues of race have been continually sidestepped. Although the survey demographics were separated into the category of male or female, the data was not analyzed to account for race or ethnicity.

"How are you going to be motivated when cotton balls are getting strewn all over the place?" Langley said.

Despite the many complaints about the survey, specifically regarding its true ability to represent the population because some chose not to respond, agronomy professor Bill Wiebold said at the very least it gave a snapshot of the current environment.

Wiebold acknowledged poor minority representation, two years without raises and a lack of participation were going to play a role in making the survey an imperfect source, but he said it still had its merit.

"A picture is better than a guess," Wiebold said.

The survey results expose problems with the way things are run on the administrative level, mathematics professor Stephen Montgomery-Smith said. He said many staff and faculty are uncomfortable to state how they feel.

"There are a lot of issues on campus where people feel like if they complain they'll just get in more trouble," Montgomery-Smith said.
The benefits survey also asked faculty and staff whether they were in favor of extending benefits to same-sex domestic partners. The UM results were equally split when it came to being strongly opposed or strongly in favor, with 34 percent of the votes going in both directions.

Thirteen percent of the voters were in slight agreement with the benefits extension, and 9 percent were in slight disagreement. Overall, 1,200 faculty and staff members chose not to answer the question.

MU responded to the proposal with 50 percent of faculty and staff strongly agreeing to extend benefits to same-sex domestic partners. Although the MU response yielded a larger percentage of those in favor of the proposal than the overall UM system, Chairwoman Leona Rubin said she was surprised the university didn’t have a higher rate of support for the issue.

“Some of this is economics, some of this is social expectations,” Rubin said.