After their fling, Big 12 schools endorse the virtues of commitment

SAM MELLINGER

June 8th, 2010

Brady Deaton is out of the office, and cell reception can be spotty, but he picks up his iPhone to talk business because this is important. He knows that the remake of the wounded Big 12 is only beginning.

Deaton, Missouri’s chancellor and the conference’s board chairman, is aware that many of you are skeptical about his league’s future. And more to the point, he understands why.

“Oh, sure,” he says. “I can see why a lot of people would raise questions. There were issues that led to the last discussion, and a lot of those have not changed.”

This is honest talk from one of the central figures rebuilding one of Kansas City’s most important sports franchises. As Kansas athletic director Lew Perkins said three weeks ago, after 10 schools committed to keep the conference together, the work is only now getting started.

There are still misperceptions about what this league was, is and likely will be — and even those within the power circle seem to be working with bad information. For instance, Deaton confirmed that a 10-year agreement referred to publicly by Perkins and Kansas State athletic director John Currie doesn’t exist.

The league is trying to make its way under the same bylaws that Nebraska and Colorado bailed on, with the remaining schools betting the future on good vibes and a renewed commitment formed after failing to find a better situation.

So with nothing in writing to keep what’s left of the conference together, fans are left to wonder why they should believe that any remaining school wouldn’t listen to another conference’s offer.

“What’s keeping us from saying ‘yes’ is our genuine commitment to the Big 12,” Deaton says. “Were that to occur, we would simply thank them, say, ‘Thank you, but we knew where we’re headed and we’re moving forward.’ That’s not an issue at all.”

Even as he says this, Deaton knows the league’s actions must be the proof. That will take time.
Before we get to the implications for our three local schools, let's look at why fans should be optimistic that the league will exist long enough for it to matter.

A handful of college sports insiders — including officials at Kansas, Kansas State and Missouri as well as the NCAA — spoke for this column and described a general feeling that the Big 12’s future is solid even if the reasons are more circumstantial.

Realignment took a nasty turn around the Big 12 as negotiations and gripes became public. It’s a bad look when another conference’s commissioner is jet-setting through the region on a recruiting tour, and a worse look when it occurs as schools are openly bickering with one another.

Each school was out for its own best interests, so you can take the 10 schools’ decision to remain together one of two ways: Settling for lack of a better partner or renewing wedding vows for a more permanent commitment.

“We’re more stable because you have 10 schools that said they’re committed to what we have,” Currie says. “We’ve done that with the statements that have been made and the fact that member institutions considered other options and embraced our league going forward.”

What may come of it is a more sincere commitment, now that each school knows this is its best situation. A KU source maintains he never doubted his school would be included in a BCS conference, but when pushed admits there was no backup plan. That was more hope than reason.

So our three local schools plus Iowa State and Baylor know how close they came to irrelevance, and the other five — most notably Texas — were reminded that they can’t get a better deal anywhere else. Nebraska had long been considered by many the league’s biggest source of anti-Texas energy, so maybe with the Huskers gone, the Big 12 can better work together.

In the short term, the league is stronger because it caught a break when its television partners agreed to keep the current contracts, meaning the same amount of money will be divided by fewer schools. In the long term, industry projections are for the Big 12 to eventually distribute $200 million to its 10 schools each year.

Because television contracts drive college sports and all the realignment talk, it’s important that insiders believe it’s in the best interests of the networks for the Big 12 to stay together into the next decade. Network executives may still need to be fully convinced, but locking up 10 years of attractive programming is an encouragement to believe.

And about that 10-year agreement for the conference to stick together: Perkins and Currie and others have overstated it. There is no agreement, signed or otherwise, beyond the schools’ statements about wanting to stay together.
League bylaws remain unchanged, the schools apparently content to let the next round of TV contracts serve as their bond. Stiffer penalties for leaving will be considered, but Deaton and other sources say there is no particular momentum to institute anything beyond what already exists.

That leaves room and reason for skepticism. Major-college football conferences could see more movement in three or four years, and it would be naïve to predict the Big 12 would be immune.

Ask Neal Pilson, former CBS Sports president and now an industry consultant, whether he’d bet the Big 12 will still be together in 10 years.

"I don’t make bets to 10 years," he says. "Not in this business."

KU, K-State and Mizzou will benefit by working to maintain the status quo. As members of what’s been referred to as “The Forgotten Five,” they’re not in a position to negotiate much of anything beyond what they have.

It’s telling that those schools offered their share of the Nebraska and Colorado “alimony” payments to the five richer and more powerful schools to remain, and it could be a positive sign that Texas and others have publicly declined the offer. Maybe this new league will be more cohesive.

Currie and a source at Kansas were each stumped when asked what they want out of the new league that didn’t exist in the old one. Their answers were remarkably similar, with league solidarity being the most important issue.

Currie likens the plight of K-State to that of the conference, saying each entity needs to focus on itself and what it is, rather than on outside forces and what it is not.

Deaton has the more influential voice here as board chairman and points out that many of the same issues that dogged the conference before — uneven revenue distribution and disproportionate power within the league — remain.

“We’re not starting out with any assumptions that it will be different,” Deaton says. “But I would be less than honest to not say those are issues that’ve been of concern to a number of institutions — all institutions, really. I’m not saying it has to be any particular way, one way or the other. But it’s gotta be issues that we recognize and work together to build on."

Even some of these issues have been misrepresented or at least misunderstood. Missouri has been the loudest critic of the Big 12’s uneven revenue distribution, so how many fans would be surprised to know MU has actually benefited from the system in recent years?

Or to hear that the differences in TV payouts within the league account for less than 10 percent of the budget disparities?
This is a league still trying to define itself, most obviously with its factually incorrect name. The Big 12 is stronger in some ways than before, and in other ways more vulnerable than ever.

Many of the perceptions are wrong, both good and bad, and perhaps most telling is that its strengths and weaknesses all seem to have more to do with outside circumstances than anything internal.

Twelve schools — yes, Nebraska and Colorado are booked — will gather for football media days this month in Dallas. That will be only the beginning of an awkward transition that leaves the remaining schools with no better option than to believe in and work toward a more solid future.

What happens next is especially important to our three local schools. Each of them realizes it with a sort of survivalist’s mentality.

“We’re happy with the way things are, but can they be improved? Yeah,” Deaton says. “I’m looking at more fundamental things. We’re trying to build a future.”
Missouri colleges lack funds for critical repairs, renovations

BY TIM BARKER • tbarker@post-dispatch.com | 314-340-8350 | Posted: Sunday, July 11, 2010 11:55 pm |

There was a time when the broken Benton-Stadler science complex at the University of Missouri-St. Louis came close to being fixed.

Three times, actually.

But just when help appeared to be on the way, something bad would happen.

The most recent effort to repair and renovate the 40-year-old complex — which houses a mix of labs and classrooms that serve pretty much every student passing through campus — was derailed when federal stimulus money was diverted to other state needs. Before that, the $32 million project was delayed when the cash-strapped Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority stopped contributing to a state fund earmarked for campus improvements.

Such is the frustration facing UMSL and other campuses across the state, where the price tag for critical repairs and renovations grows with each year. Benton-Stadler is simply one of the more glaring examples. Administrators know exactly what they would like to do with the tired complex and its outdated labs. They've talked to architects. They've drawn up plans. They have everything they need. Except money.

"We're so close, I can taste it," said UMSL Chancellor Tom George. "If the economy had tanked six months later, we probably would have had our money. But that's the way it goes."

Certainly that seems to be the case in Missouri, where capital expenditures on higher education tend to be spotty even in good economic times. After all, it's been some 15 years since the state last issued bonds to pay for capital improvements on its campuses.

And given the state's rocky economic standing, there's little reason to expect much next year from a Legislature and governor facing the same pressures that forced them to cut 5 percent from higher education spending and slash a program that provides scholarships to low- and middle-income students.

But later this month, the Board of Curators for the University of Missouri system will put together a capital request for the next legislative session, detailing the needs of the four Missouri campuses.
The state has given those schools only $62 million over the last seven years. Last month's preliminary budget shows nearly $300 million in top campus priorities, including $49 million for critical needs at all four campuses and $28 million for Benton-Stadler.

"We understand the challenges the state faces," said Nikki Krawitz, the system's vice president of finance. "But we have an obligation to the students and citizens of the state to present what our needs are."

Among the priorities:

- $49.1 million for critical repairs across the four campuses.
- $64.8 million for work on Lafferre Hall, used by the college of engineering in Columbia.
- $65 million for a new facility for the colleges of optometry and nursing at the St. Louis campus.
- $70.7 million for a new complex in Rolla for biology, chemistry and chemical engineering.
- $43.2 million for the Miller Nichols Library renovation and interactive learning center addition at the Kansas City campus.

In some instances, the campuses are trying to modernize equipment to make sure students are keeping up with peers around the nation. Sometimes it's about bringing together educational disciplines that are scattered around campus. And often, it's about keeping aging buildings from falling apart.

That's one of the tasks falling upon Gary Ward, the associate vice chancellor for facilities at the Columbia campus, who tracks the needs of 110 academic buildings.

Today, those buildings need $500 million in repairs, renovations and upgrades. It's a figure that's expected to grow by $20 million a year without some change in the amount of money available for capital repairs. Unless something changes, Ward said, some of those buildings will be unusable within a decade.

"The problem is getting so big, it's just going to snowball on us," Ward said.

Last year, the school dedicated a portion of its maintenance budget — a move that has the potential to create other problems down the line — to pay for its share of a $35 million bond issue by the Missouri system. The campus used its $19 million to renovate Tate Hall and Schweitzer Hall, the oldest academic building on campus.

But that still leaves the campus with its most pressing need, the $64 million renovation of Lafferre Hall, with its outdated heating and cooling systems and stairways out of compliance with building codes. It has accessibility issues. Labs are outdated. And on rainy days, trash cans are used in hallways to catch leaks.
"It's really a depressing sight when you see something like that," Ward said "This is Mizzou, one of the premiere universities in the nation."

There's only so much the individual universities can do to address problems with their academic buildings. Unlike revenue-generating buildings — think residence halls and parking garages — the academic buildings are reliant on some sort of outside support for upkeep. And it's rare that this outside support will come from private donors and alumni, who are more likely to give money for scholarship funds and new buildings.

But renovating an old classroom or paying for a new roof?

"Donors aren't very excited about giving to that kind of project," said Rae Goldsmith, a vice president with the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. "And it just gets more and more expensive the longer you wait."

One of the best hopes — albeit a long shot — is the possibility of new bonds being issued by the state, which is just now paying off debt issued in the early 1980s for similar purposes. Some legislators pushed unsuccessfully in the last session to take advantage of low interest rates to raise $800 million to address the most critical need on each of the state's campuses.

The effort was led in the House by Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia, and Rep. Steve Tilley, R-Perryville, but it never made it to the floor for a vote. It's unclear how it would have fared in the Senate. Gov. Jay Nixon has not taken a position on the issue.

Supporters are a bit more optimistic about the measure's chances in the coming year, in part because Tilley is expected to be speaker of the House.

They're touting the idea both as an economic recovery vehicle — pointing to jobs generated by construction projects — and as a way to help campuses coping with deteriorating infrastructures.

"There's probably nothing less sexy in the universe than tuckpointing," Kelly said. "But guess what. If you don't do it, your building will leak."
MU has an iPhone app for that

Published: Tuesday, July 13, 2010 2:51 AM CDT

COLUMBIA (AP) -- University of Missouri freshmen who don't know their way around the Columbia campus this fall will be able to turn to their iPhones for a little help to navigate the first year of college.

GoMizzou, the official iPhone application for Missouri, is scheduled to debut Aug. 23, the first day of classes.

"I see just about every incoming freshman bust out their maps on the first day of school," Tim Noce, president of the Missouri Students Association, said. "Maybe this will make them look a little less freshman-like."

MSA came up with the idea for Missouri when a handful of other colleges came out with iPhone applications. But the Missouri version hit a snag when student leaders found outside companies were charging about $50,000 a year to create and maintain the apps.

"We decided to do it in-house and worked on it, but we ran into some bureaucracy," he said.

Noce said the first version would be fairly basic, and that it would include a campus map, calendar and links to university news.

Noce said there are several possibilities for GoMizzou in the future, including a button that would allow students to call STRIPES, the sober-driving program, with the touch of a finger.

"We're going to look at the feedback we get and see what happens," Noce said.

Kristen Reagan, who will be a junior this fall, said using a map on a mobile phone would have been handier than the map on the back of a folder that she had as a freshman. She'd also like to see a link to some other vital student information.
"I always used to look up the menus at dining halls as a freshman, so that would be pretty handy for freshmen to have," she said.
MU's iPhone app set to release this fall

By Mallory Benedict
July 12, 2010 | 8:06 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Starting this fall, iPhone-savvy students at MU, as well as others interested in the university, can stay connected using the goMizzou iPhone app, expected to be released on Aug. 23, the first day of classes.

Following the model of the iStanford app, released in October 2008, other universities around the country, including Texas A&M and Duke, have followed suit.

Generally, an app, short for application, is a program that can be installed on a smartphone. The goMizzou app is intended to make the university more accessible for students and visitors by allowing them to stay updated on, and engaged in, campus happenings.

"We know that students come to content through a mobile platform in increased numbers in past years, so we need to be able to innovate to be able to better serve our students where they are," said Keith Politte, manager of the Technology Testing Center at the Reynolds Journalism Institute and one of the creators of the RJI-iPhone Student Development Competition, a program dedicated to creating apps for journalists.

"We're wanting to move our students from digital consumers to digital producers," Politte said.

Tim Noce, president of the Missouri Students Association, said there were two options to get the Mizzou app built: either have a computer science class for engineering and journalism students design it or have an outside company build and distribute it.

Hiring an outside company would have cost $45,000 per year, Noce said, so he decided to make the app in-house as part of a collaboration between the Missouri Students Association and MU's Division of Information Technology.
Politte said another benefit is that it allows students to create apps, not just use them.

"Last year, I got involved with technology and I thought it would be a really good way to make use of the new media that people were looking at with their mobile phones," Noce said.

The initial version of goMizzou will provide a map of campus, a database with contact information for students and faculty, a news feed and a calendar of events.

The features of the app will expand in the future largely based on student feedback, which the teams working on the app will incorporate, Noce said.

"It was one of my goals to have the students actually have input on the app and run it like a business," he said.

Although there is an MU Sports app under contract by CBS Sports, Noce thinks that the goMizzou app, which is completely independent from the athletics app, is more versatile for students. Plus it's free — the sports app costs $4.99.

Right now, the goMizzou app will work only with iPhones. But Politte and Kevin Bailey, director of customer service and support in the Division of Information Technology, are optimistic that it will eventually extend to other smartphones and communication platforms, such as the Internet and the iPad.

"We would have to support more than just the iPhone," said Bailey, who helps coordinate the members of the teams working on the app. "The goal is to get this information into all the students' hands."
University keeps vets story project alive

By Janese Silvey - The Columbia (Mo.) Daily Tribune via AP
Posted: Monday Jul 12, 2010 14:47:12 EDT

COLUMBIA, Mo. — As a veteran of Afghanistan and an active member of the Army National Guard, Rep. Jason Kander knows the importance of sharing stories from combat. But he isn't keen on the idea of doing that on taxpayers' dimes — 6 million dimes, to be exact.

Kander was one of the state lawmakers who helped scrap $600,000 from the upcoming state budget that had been requested to support Missouri Veterans Stories, a project that records Missouri veterans talking about their war experiences.

Now, he and several other representatives are teaming up with the University of Missouri to recreate that veteran video program in a way that benefits students and saves taxpayer dollars.

Missouri Veterans Stories debuted in 2007 and has since produced about 1,300 videos of men and women sharing their memories from World War II. It has been operated out of Lt. Gov. Peter Kinder’s office and managed by a private video company, Patriot Productions.

When Kander began questioning the allocation during a budget committee meeting this past session, he learned that the state was the company’s only client. Further investigation revealed that those affiliated with Patriot Productions also made campaign contributions to Kinder, said Kander, D-Kansas City.

Then Kander asked how much each video cost. When lawmakers learned the price tag was $1,400 a video, “there was an audible gasp in the room,” he said.

Arguing against funding that supported a veterans program wasn’t easy, Kander said. “But when we’re in a budget crisis and cutting funding left and right from vital state services, it’s impossible to justify,” he said.

Enter Rep. Jill Schupp, D-Creve Coeur, who pointed out to lawmakers that the Missouri School of Journalism was located just up the road.

“Why aren’t we utilizing that entity to help create these videos?” she asked. “That serves a couple of purposes, including giving students not only technical training but also sort of a historical perspective.”
One faculty member was already doing similar work on campus. Last semester, professor Elaine Lawless tasked her graduate students to conduct field research by recording oral histories with veterans. She had been involved at the national level with the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project and wanted to see how it would work in the classroom.

“It was very successful,” Lawless said. “So it just represents one possibility of what can be done in Missouri.”

Last month, Lawless joined Kander, Schupp and Rep. Stephen Webber, D-Columbia, and university representatives on the MU campus to discuss a future veterans’ video program for the state. The Missouri Veterans History Project Coalition is meeting again Monday to continue to hash out details of a new, non-political oral history program.

Committee members will have to determine how to implement oral histories into existing curricula on campus, how the equipment and supplies will be funded and whether to expand the histories to include interviews of younger veterans returning home with fresh memories.

Training also will be a key component, Lawless said. Her students sat through training on privacy laws and were armed with sample questions and release forms from the Veterans History Project before heading out with cameras to interview veterans. The preparation paid off.

“The feedback I got was that they felt like my students were thoughtful and good listeners and energetic about what they were doing,” Lawless said.

Although the program is in a preliminary stage, those involved in the endeavor agreed it’s worthwhile.

“We just felt that the story of Missouri veterans is sort of the story of our community, so we know who we are as a people, as a town, as a county and as a state, and the importance of recognizing the deeds of our citizens and what they’ve done,” Webber said.

And, perhaps just as important, “we’re going to continue it in a way the state can actually afford,” Kander said. “I’m a veteran of Afghanistan so I know a lot of people who have valuable stories to tell. I’m just not willing to spend $1,400 in taxpayer money for every one of those stories.”