Overflowing on-campus housing leaves local universities pressed for options

By MARÁ ROSE WILLIAMS
The Kansas City Star

Nothing is soft about the housing market when it comes to dorm rooms at some regional universities.

Students planning to live on Kansas State University's campus who haven't yet signed their housing contract may end up bunking at a Manhattan hotel.

In Columbia, the University of Missouri limited the number of upperclassmen living on campus, even paying out roughly $100,000 to urge more to move off. A $1,000 bonus was offered to students to give up their housing contracts to make space for freshmen, who are required to live on campus.

"We knew we were looking at a tight campus housing situation," said MU spokesman Christian Basi.

Schuyler Noeth, a 20-year-old engineering major from St. Louis, has lived on campus at Mizzou for two years. She is one of the upper-class students who would rather live on campus because it's modern, convenient "and no cheaper off campus."

"I know $1,000 sounds like quite a bit," Noeth said, but it was not enough to lure her out of the suite she shares with a roommate.

One big attraction to staying in university housing? The custodial crew.

"We don't have to worry about cleaning our bathrooms," Noeth said. "We can concentrate on studying."

Nationally, schools are facing a larger college-age population and a greater percentage of that group wanting higher education. Plus, "more students come back to campus year after year," said Pat Bosco, vice president for K-State student life.

The tough economy has caused many to decide it's cheaper to stay on campus and avoid utilities, groceries and transportation costs of private apartments around town.

K-State has no vacancies in campus dormitories or apartments, and arrangements are under way to put at least 100 students in a hotel or have them rent off-campus housing.

Students who stay in a hotel near campus get nearly the same residential life services as dorm residents and pay a modified rate for the housing and food. How much is still being decided.

The hotel option is becoming standard practice for stressed universities, said James Baumann at the Association of College and University Housing Officers.

Other regional universities do not have K-State's overflow but report being full. The University of Missouri-Kansas City this year limited housing in its newest apartment complex to students only. At the University of Kansas, officials say they still have a few vacancies.
Mizzou postponed renovations that would have temporarily shut down one of its dorms. The school will continue using two apartment complexes it began leasing two years ago and will also borrow a residence hall at nearby Stephens College.

K-State capacity has been stretched for several years, Bosco said, “but in previous years we have been able to find enough space on campus by doubling up in rooms and converting closets.”

Even with 700 units in new apartments and town houses built over the last three years at the Jardin Complex, housing has come up short. A second phase of that new complex begins in the fall.

Students with signed K-State housing contracts have secured slots.

Such modern campus housing contributes to the trend of more upperclassmen opting to live on campus.

The Association of College and University Housing Officers expects to hear more about campus room shortages.

Tusculum College in Tennessee put some upperclassmen up at a Comfort Inn for an entire school year, and Ohio State University bought and converted a hotel.

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Audit criticizes university lobbying efforts

Montee: Politics affects process.

By Janese Silvey

Thursday, July 29, 2010

The annual budgeting process that appropriates state money to colleges and universities is too political and circumvents the Coordinating Board for Higher Education’s power to make sure resources are being used efficiently, according to a state audit released yesterday.

Higher education institutions turn in budget requests to the coordinating board, which in turn presents a plan to lawmakers. But four-year institutions have separate line items in the state budget giving lawmakers a chance to increase funding for specific universities, and that creates problems, Auditor Susan Montee said.

“It’s not a coordinated effort,” she said. “Legislators are advocating for certain things in their area.”

And universities are spending thousands on lobbying efforts to sway those legislators, she said. During the 2008 and 2009 fiscal years, the University of Missouri System spent $920,000 on lobbying efforts, the audit said.

UM System spokeswoman Jennifer Hollingshead clarified that the amount reflects salaries and benefits of in-house lobbyists from those two years. But the government relations department has since been restructured, and Hollingshead said that cost today would be significantly lower.

This year, the system has five active state lobbyists, according to the Missouri Ethics Commission. Most of their monthly expenditures during the past legislative session included meals, beverages and entertainment tickets, according to disclosure reports.

Montee stopped short of recommending that universities do away with lobbying teams or that the state no longer allow separate budget lines for individual institutions. But something needs to change, she said.

Hollingshead would not discuss concerns flagged in the audit but said UM’s position is that local autonomy is the best model.
Lowell Kruse, chairman of the coordinating board, said he's still reviewing the audit findings, but he understands the dilemma. Public institutions funded with state money want the ability to make their case for funding directly to the decision makers.

"On the other hand, they want a body that prevents disconnectedness from happening," he said. "That's the dichotomy."

Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia, said he wouldn't be interested in changing the current system that allows four-year institutions to have individual budget line items.

"Essentially, that makes the coordinating board the Board of Curators for the whole system, and that's not going to happen," he said.

The coordinating board audit was one of two higher education-related audits Montee's office released yesterday. The second criticized the management of the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority money that was expected to fund construction projects on campuses. Sixteen projects selected to receive funding weren't considered priorities, raising flags about why they were chosen. Again, Montee questioned whether lobbying and special interests got in the way of using state resources efficiently.

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Gov. Nixon in Columbia to launch economic planning initiative

By Alysha Love
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COLUMBIA — Gov. Jay Nixon addressed a newly formed economic steering committee Thursday at its first meeting at the MU Reynolds Alumni Center, encouraging the group to act quickly to create a five-year plan for economic development in Missouri.

"This is designed as a way for the private sector to assist us, working together, to focus our economy," Nixon said.

The 40-member steering committee is part of Nixon's 2010 Strategic Initiative for Economic Growth, which is being coordinated by David Kerr, director of the Department of Economic Development. Nixon said leaders in business, higher education, economic planning and labor from around the state were selected to bring their expertise to the table.

Their goal is to create six to eight strategic objectives to drive economic growth in Missouri, based on existing and future industries. Each objective will be backed by a more detailed "tactical plan," Nixon said.

Bruce Walker, the dean of the MU College of Business, is the only committee member from Columbia. He said he sees himself as a representative for the greater state as well as the university.

"We have a statewide perspective with this steering committee, but I believe that the university can be very important to whatever plan is developed," Walker said.

"I think the university's role will be to try to help provide the educated workforce that's going to be needed for these technology-based industries in the future."
Walker said he believes MU can play an important role in developing economic growth for the state.

"There's a great opportunity for enterprise start-ups coming out of the scientific discoveries of the university," he said. "I think the university can provide leadership in that area as well."

The committee's priority recommendations are due to Nixon's desk by Dec. 1, he said, though they won't necessarily become legislation in the 2011 session.

"If legislation comes from this, fine, but that's not the point," he said. "We've got a lot of assets in the state, we've got laws already passed, we've got tools in place. This is more of a 'how do we focus what we have and make some choices about how we're going to spend our resources in the future.'"

The committee will meet with six regional planning teams to help develop its five-year plan, which committee members intend to complete in six to nine months.
Nixon lays out goals for economic growth effort

By Janese Silvey

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Missouri is a centrally located state with natural resources, a hard-working employee pool and diverse industries, Gov. Jay Nixon said Thursday. But the state can’t be the best at everything, he cautioned.

That’s why he has charged a 40-member task force with narrowing Missouri’s economic focus in hopes of preparing the state for the future. Nixon outlined his plan Thursday at the group’s inaugural meeting at the Reynolds Alumni Center on the University of Missouri campus.

The Missouri Strategic Initiative for Economic Growth group spent the day on campus talking about the state’s economic strengths and weaknesses, new research ventures and discussing where the committee will go from here.

During a luncheon speech, Nixon gave members some guidelines. He wants input from business and education leaders from across the state, he wants bold ideas and he wants them backed up with supporting data. Nixon also wants preliminary recommendations on his desk by Dec. 1.

The group will spend the coming months meeting with business and education leaders in six Missouri regions to get input, said chairman David Kerr, director of the Department of Economic Development.

“We’re designing the process from the bottom up,” he said.

From there, the group will identify six to eight key initiatives where Missouri can excel, then come up with any state policy or legislative changes necessary to make them happen, Kerr said.

Nixon highlighted some areas in which he sees Missouri as having an edge over other states, such as its central location and natural assets as well as being a “transportation hub.”

Although the study has just begun, Nixon identified transportation as a key area where Missouri can thrive. Supporting the Claycomo Ford Motor Co. assembly plant, he noted, has a trickle-down effect that keeps the plants making parts for those vehicles stable, too.
Earlier this month, lawmakers — at Nixon’s urging — approved a tax incentive package meant to encourage Ford’s Claycomo plant to upgrade and remain in the state. Critics accused the state of picking economic “winners and losers.”

Nixon did not deny that when asked about the criticism in relation to a strategic plan that narrows the focus to a handful of industries.

“We’re playing to our strengths,” he said. “We can be really good at some things, but we can’t be really good at everything and if we try we’re only going to be average at it.”

Nixon also highlighted the state’s tourism attractions, from state parks, trails and lakes to Branson’s commercial appeal, MU’s research mission and work ethics of Missourians.

Nixon told the committee they will play a vital role in shaping Missouri’s future, vowing that this strategic plan will be different from others that simply sit on a shelf.

“We are pioneers heading out on a new journey,” he said. “We stand on the shoulders of many great leaders and business leaders in the state.”

The only Columbia representative listed as a member of the task force is Bruce Walker, former dean of the University of Missouri College of Business.

Reach Janese Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com.
OUR VIEW • GOV. NIXON FAILS ACCESS MISSOURI SCHOLARSHIP STUDENTS.

Passing the buck

NO MENTION

Depressing news started to dribble out of the Missouri Department of Higher Education earlier this week. Colleges and universities that participate in the Access Missouri scholarship program learned that the maximum award available to each student is being cut starting this school year.

Access Missouri had been providing annual awards between $1,000 and $2,150 for students who attend a state four-year college or university and between $2,000 and $4,600 for students at private institutions in Missouri. It is the state's needs-based scholarship program.

Many students who depend on Access Missouri scholarships receive little or no assistance from their parents.

This week, just as tuition-bill notices arrive in students' in-boxes, the Department of Higher Ed announced that Missouri Access scholarships will be capped at $950 for students at public four-year colleges and universities.

Awards to students at private colleges or universities, meanwhile, will max out at $1,900.

Why did the ax fall at the last minute? The state Legislature provided $82.8 million for the program. But Gov. Jay Nixon cut $50 million as part of massive statewide budget cuts.

Missouri's Higher Education Loan Authority swooped in with a one-time infusion that restored $30 million to the Access Missouri budget. Yet the program still is down $20 million, and the number of students seeking aid grew sharply — from 86,000 to 102,000.

Faith Sandler, executive director of the Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis, said the "late and disorganized way in which students and families are learning of the cuts is perhaps the most damaging."

"Both 'too little' and 'too late' breed bad decisions — dropping out or borrowing too much," she said.
We asked Mr. Nixon's communications office what the governor would say to students who have embarked on a college career, partly in reliance on Access Missouri funding, who have worked hard and played by the rules, but whose attendance now is jeopardized by the reductions.

A spokesman observed that Mr. Nixon has defended the budgets of Missouri's public colleges and universities and, in the process, won a tuition freeze, now in its second year.

In fact, Mr. Nixon effectively jacked up tuition by cutting Access Missouri — not for everyone, just for the students who can least afford it.

Mr. Nixon's spokesman said "a lot of difficult choices had to be made," and the governor sees his responsibility as ensuring the state lives within its means.

Cutting the budget isn't difficult. It's easy. It might be unpleasant, especially when reneging on promises made to college students. But all the governor must do is instruct his budget officials to withhold funds.

Then the hardship is passed down the line to the people left to pick up the pieces. In this case, that means college students from low- and moderate-income families who have done all we have asked them to do.

If the governor were to make a difficult choice, he would lead and take some political risks for these kids, rather than just pass the buck.

Mr. Nixon often says that budgets reflect priorities. If fairness is one of the governor's priorities, he will stick up for Access Missouri students and restore the cut funds — rather than pull the rug out from under students.
The University of Missouri—St. Louis has responded to state budget cuts by reducing its overhead and, surprisingly to some, increasing scholarships and freezing tuition. It's a difficult financial tightrope that is keeping one of the nation's best public metropolitan universities affordable for area students.

UMSL has budgeted more than $13 million in institutional financial aid for this fiscal year and has raised $11.5 million in additional private scholarship funds as part of the Gateway for Greatness fundraising campaign.

"Freezing tuition for two consecutive years has helped our students stretch their education dollars," UMSL Chancellor Tom George said. "When you couple that with financial aid opportunities — UMSL students receive nearly $125 million in financial aid annually from the university and other sources — the value proposition is unbeatable."

UMSL is the largest university in the St. Louis region and has more alumni — about 60,000 — living and working in the area than any other university. The university reached that goal by offering excellent learning experiences and leadership opportunities to a diverse student body through outstanding faculty, ranked programs, innovative research and community partnerships.

"UMSL provides a quality, affordable education along with hundreds of scholarship opportunities," George said. "I encourage all prospective students to visit our beautiful campus and learn more about everything this excellent university has to offer."

For more information or to schedule a campus tour, visit umsl.edu/admission or call 314-516-8675.