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Missouri curators to weigh tuition increase

The Associated Press

University of Missouri curators meet Friday with an agenda topped by an expected 5.5 percent average increase in tuition and fees for in-state undergraduates.

The planned increase meets the goal of keeping any tuition hikes below 10 percent. Tuition has remained flat at the system's four campuses the past two years.

The proposed hikes vary from 4.7 percent at the St. Louis campus to 6.6 percent at Missouri University of Science and Technology in Rolla.

The Columbia campus wants a 5.8 percent increase, while the Kansas City campus is recommending a 4.8 percent increase.



MU course fees stir debate in tuition talks

By Janese Silvey

Published January 27, 2011 at 4:32 p.m.

University of Missouri System curators will vote Friday, as expected, on a 5.5 percent systemwide average increase in tuition and required fees, but it's not clear whether they'll stamp administrators' recommendations to increase specific course fees.

Specifically troubling to some curators is a proposal to increase business school course fees at MU from \$35.50 to \$70, a 97 percent increase.

The board is meeting in Columbia on Thursday and Friday to set tuition rates for the 2011-12 academic year. The action is necessary now in order for administrators to seek a waiver from the state to raise tuition by more than the consumer price index, or 1.5 percent, under a three-year-old state law. The deadline to ask for that waiver is Tuesday.

On Thursday, the board's three-member finance committee moved along to the full board a recommendation to increase tuition as recommended. That includes a 6.5 percent tuition increase and 1.1 percent course fee increase at MU — an average combined increase of 5.8 percent.

The committee also approved an amendment to cap course fee increases to no more than 9 percent. That doesn't mean the full board will OK the change, though. Vice President of Finance Nikki Krawitz said she'll bring options for curators to review and vote on Friday morning, including her original recommendations.

Curators don't need the state's OK to increase course fees by more than inflation because not all students pay them. But significantly increasing those fees sends a bad message to lawmakers in Jefferson City who are holding a sharp budget knife this legislative session, Curator Don Downing said.

Gov. Jay Nixon has recommended a budget that cuts higher education funding by 7 percent, which equates to about \$29 million for the UM System. Downing stressed that's no guarantee: The legislature will make the final decision and is going to have to make cuts somewhere.

"Lawmakers who do not want to fund education will use whatever they can use," including the 97 percent increase, "to make a point," he said.

The business school fee increase would support a two-year-old program that better prepares students to be professional and successful in the workplace, said Joan Gabel, dean of the Trulaske College of Business. That program was funded with private donations that are running out, she said, and without new revenues the professional development program is at risk.

Students are willing to pay more for programs that help them get jobs after colleges, said Laura Confer, the student curator from Rolla. She defended the course fee increases, saying curators should focus on the actual dollar amount and not the percentage of increases.

A proposed 9 percent cap would also affect the Missouri School of Journalism, which is seeking a 45 percent, or \$18.60 course fee increase; health professions programs that are asking for a 37 percent, or \$20.30 increase; and the College of Engineering, asking for a 23 percent, or \$14, increase.

All other course fees at MU are scheduled to increase by 6.5 percent.

Curator David Wasinger said he doesn't like the idea of course fees being tacked onto tuition, saying he's heard from friends and relatives who get upset when their bills aren't what they expected.

"I'm wondering if we're hiding the ball from these students by back-dooring our way into increasing revenues with these supplemental fees," he said.

Interim President Steve Owens said that's not the case. Course fees are disclosed up front. The goal, he said, is to get the fees to match the costs of specific programs so students in one school aren't paying a disproportionate amount to offset the cost of pricier schools.

"I agree there's clear disclosure," Downing said, "but a lot of times students shopping for college comparing tuition don't focus on supplemental fees. At a time when they're very low, that may not be significant but as we increase these, it becomes more and more significant. People are going to start comparing tuition and supplemental course fees."

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THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Search for new University of Missouri president begins

The Associated Press

COLUMBIA | **The search for a new University of Missouri president is beginning in earnest.**

The Board of Curators planned to discuss the search for Gary Forsee's permanent replacement during their regularly scheduled meeting Thursday in Columbia.

Forsee stepped down earlier this month to care for his ill wife. Acting president Steve Owens has said he is not interested in a permanent job leading the four-campus system.

The curators are expected to hire an executive search firm to guide the process. They also expect to appoint an advisory committee of faculty members and others who would offer suggestions to the board, which has final hiring approval.

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Firm will help find UM leader

BY TIM BARKER tbarker@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8350 | Posted: Friday, January 28, 2011 12:00 am

COLUMBIA, Mo. • **The University of Missouri on Thursday took its first steps down the long path toward finding its next president.**

The system's Board of Curators met to discuss how they would go about replacing Gary Forsee, who resigned this month to spend time with his ill wife. On Thursday, curators decided to hire a search consulting firm and agreed they would set no timetable for the hiring process.

"I don't like limiting our options with a deadline. It limits your flexibility," said Warren Erdman, chairman of the board.

Among the things that could cause delays is the fact that some candidates — particularly any who are campus presidents elsewhere — may not be free to leave their current jobs without lengthy notice.

Still, it's likely to be two to three months before the job is even officially posted.

The curators want to hold off on any major decisions until four of them — nearly half of the nine-member group — are replaced by Gov. Jay Nixon and confirmed by the state Senate.

The rough timeline calls for the curators to meet again in late February to interview finalists for the firm that will assist in the search. There will then be a series of public forums across the state in early March to get input from faculty, students and others.

Only then will the position be posted and advertised.

"Following that, it's almost impossible to say what will happen," said Betsy Rodriguez, the system's vice president for human resources.

Forsee replaced Elson Floyd, who left the in 2007 to become president of Washington State University. The search for Forsee, a former chief executive officer of Sprint Nextel, dragged on for nearly a year — a time frame Rodriguez said is not that unusual.

Tuition Decision Nears

Curators also moved closer to their first tuition increase in three years. The board's three-member finance committee voted 2-1 in favor of the 5.5 percent hike — the average of the increases on the four campuses — that could take affect this summer.

The full board will vote on the increase, as well as a variety of higher fees and housing costs, during its session today. If the board approves the increases, it will next have to seek a waiver from the state's commissioner of higher education, since the increases exceed the rate of inflation.

As proposed, the increases in tuition and fees for Missouri undergraduates:

- 4.7 percent at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.
 - 4.8 percent at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.
 - 5.8 percent at the University of Missouri-Columbia.
 - 6.6 percent at the Missouri University of Science and Technology.
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UM curators to hire firm for president search

By Janese Silvey

Published January 27, 2011 at 11:57 a.m.

Updated January 27, 2011 at 1:48 p.m.

The search for the next University of Missouri System president is officially under way, but candidates aren't expected to emerge until spring.

First, UM curators will spend early March hosting public forums to see what Missourians want in the next university leader. Although times haven't been set, the Board of Curators is expected to hold the meetings March 1-11, including a stop at the Reynolds Alumni Center on the MU campus.

The Board of Curators has formed a search committee to start the process of replacing Gary Forsee, who resigned Jan. 7 to care for his ailing wife. Steve Owens, the university's general counsel, is serving as interim president.

With Owens on board, curators agreed they're not in a hurry to hire someone.

Instead, they're more interested in making sure they find the right person.

"You don't want the schedule to dictate a poor outcome," board Chairman Warren Erdman said.

Typically, university presidential searches last between nine and 12 months, said Betsy Rodriguez, vice president of human resources. She will serve as the staff administrator over the search process.

Curators hashed out details of the search process at their meeting today at the alumni center in Columbia, agreeing not to post the position until meeting with residents, alumni, faculty and students. That will allow the advertisement for the job to include the qualifications and skills constituents say are important, Erdman said.

Curators agreed to hire a search firm after some discussion. Curator Don Downing said he worried about paying for a consulting firm in tough budget times and said he didn't want a firm to show biases toward certain candidates.

But Erdman stressed the board won't solely rely on a search firm to bring nominees. Rather, the firm should help the board provide a uniform, confidential process that includes vetting candidates, he said.

"The search firm provides an even-keel process," he said. "I tend to be one who is not excited about spending money on that. Having said that, I believe" and have said "we were going to have a broad and inclusive search, that we were going to cast the net wide and that we were going to do it by the book."

The board owes it to the university and stakeholders to do so, he said.

Curators also agreed a search firm should not solely have expertise in higher education but should also be able to bring private-sector candidates to the table.

In addition to the board search committee, the university is establishing an advisory committee that would include students and residents.

Rodriguez outlined qualifications for a search firm, which likely will be selected next month. The company should develop a list of diverse candidates, conduct appropriate reviews and background checks and ensure potential candidates are kept confidential, she said.

With those guidelines, she said, "The University of Missouri is poised to attract some very good candidates."

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MISSOURIAN

UM Curators debate presidential search, tuition increases

By Alex Keckeisen, Victoria Guida
January 27, 2011 | 8:21 p.m. CST

COLUMBIA — The **University of Missouri** System is one step closer to having a new president and maybe a day away from increasing tuition.

The UM System Board of Curators discussed increasing tuition at all four campuses and voted unanimously Thursday to hire a search firm to find the next president of the UM System.

The curators granted Betsy Rodriguez, vice president of human resources, approval to send letters to prospective search firms to seek proposals. The curators also voted to create a presidential search advisory committee comprised of people already involved with the university.

Rodriguez said she has a list of eight to 12 firms and narrowing it to two or three finalists should not be hard. Baker-Parker, Inc. was selected as the search firm during the UM System's last presidential search.

Curator Warren Erdman pointed out that not all candidates for the position should be presented by the search firm.

"I would encourage all stakeholders at the University of Missouri, and for that matter the civic leaders of Missouri, to help us identify candidates," Erdman said to the other members of the board.

Erdman favored the search committee taking its time with the process.

"I don't like limiting our options by a deadline," Erdman said. "You don't want the schedule dictating a poor outcome."

Presidential searches typically last between six and 12 months, Rodriguez told the curators, with the former being rarer.

Curators acknowledged having interim president Steve Owens will help with the process because it relaxes the need for a firm deadline.

For John M. Carnahan III and three other curators, this will be their last meeting. They will make way for new members, appointed by Gov. Jay Nixon, whose involvement in the search will be

vital, Carnahan said. "We need to get the new curators into this process as fast as possible," he said.

The curators will hold six public forums in the coming months to gain input from the public. Erdman stressed the importance of the meetings, as well as the curators' attendance.

"It's important that we bring the public into this process as best we can," Erdman said. "If we choose to do this, I think it's important that we all attend."

Tuition increase

With the UM System facing a \$72 million budget shortfall, and state appropriations dropping, the curators were forced to consider raising tuition and fees.

The finance committee discussed whether to limit increases in tuition and required fees. Curator Don Downing suggested limiting the average tuition increase for all four campuses to 5 percent. That motion failed, so the board will vote Friday on a 5.5 percent average increase.

For MU, tuition would be increased by a total of 6.5 percent. Required fees, including activity and health fees, would be increased by 1.1 percent. The average of these two percentages is a 5.8 percent total cost increase for students in the coming fiscal year.

The tuition increases come at the expense of students' ability to continue paying for higher education at UM System campuses — something Nikki Krawitz, vice president for finance and administration, said is a chief concern. UM System campuses will commit 20 percent of revenue from the tuition increases to grant aid for students.

"I will emphasize that our financial aid offices are committed to working with students to make it possible for those who have been enrolled to continue to be enrolled," Krawitz said.

The board will also vote Friday on Downing's other motion: capping supplemental course fees at a 9 percent increase. This cap would only affect course fee increases for four departments at MU: allied health, business, engineering and journalism. The suggested increases are:

- Business: 97.2 percent; \$34.50 more per course
- Journalism: 44.9 percent; \$18.60 more per course
- Health professions: 37.1 percent; \$20.30 more per course
- Engineering: 23.3 percent; \$14.00 more per course

Suggested course fee increases for all other departments at MU were 6.5 percent.

Three Missouri curators named

By MARA ROSE WILLIAMS

The Kansas City Star

The University of Missouri's Board of Curators has three new board members appointed this week by Gov. Jay Nixon.

Two of the three newly appointed to the nine-member board are lawyers. Craig Van Matre of Columbia replaces Bo Fraser, who resigned in December, and Donald Cupps of Cassville, who replaces John Carnahan.

The third new appointee is St. Louis businessman David Steward, who replaces David Wasinger. Terms for Wasinger and Carnahan expired Jan. 1.

Van Matre, a Mizzou graduate, is president of the law firm of Van Matre, Harrison, Hollis, Pitzer & Taylor in Columbia.

Last year Nixon appointed him to the Coordinating Board for Higher Education. He also served on the board for Stephens College.

Cupps is attorney for the city of Cassville and Barry County's industrial development authority and trustee for the Public School Retirement System of Missouri.

Steward is the chairman of World Wide Technology (WWT), a leading provider of technology products, services and supply chain solutions domestic and abroad. He founded the company in 1990 and in 2010 ranked 201 on the Forbes list of America's largest private companies. He currently sits on the Executive Advisory Board of Gov. Nixon's Strategic Initiative for Economic Growth.

Posted on Thu, Jan. 27, 2011

Veterinary lab is coming to KC area

By SCOTT CANON
The Kansas City Star

A California company plans to open a laboratory near Kansas City International Airport this year for blood, tissue and other analysis of pets.

The arrival of the Abaxis Veterinary Reference Laboratory would add yet another piece to the so-called Animal Health Corridor stretching from the University of Missouri in Columbia to Kansas State University in Manhattan.

Abaxis said the lab would ultimately generate 150 jobs, but a K-State press release projected 50 to 100 jobs. Although the lab expects to land near the airport, the company said it will set up shop on the Kansas side of the state line. Abaxis hopes to open the Kansas City area lab in six to eight months.

Most of Abaxis' business comes from selling equipment and supplies to outfit labs in veterinary offices catering to pet owners.

The new Kansas City area lab aims to serve that same market, although it would also include tests on the blood of horses and exotic animals. The lab would also conduct more sophisticated tests than most veterinarians can perform in their offices.

"This is a whole new deal for us," said Michael Solomon, Abaxis' director of business development for North American animal health.

Abaxis is teaming with K-State's Veterinary Diagnostic Lab to handle tests beyond the expertise of the company's coming Kansas City facility.

Beyond performing more sophisticated testing than that lab could handle, Solomon said K-State will be essentially a subcontractor that performs pathology and consultation based on test results.

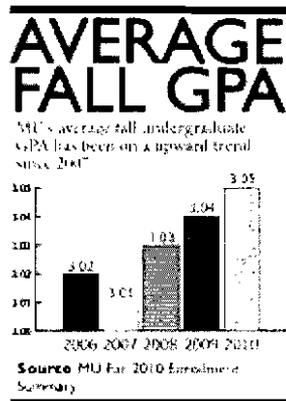
THE MANEATER

MU's fall semester GPA averages to 3.05

The School of Nursing recorded the highest GPA at MU.

By Kristian Mundahl

Published Jan. 28, 2011



MU turned out an undergraduate grade point average of 3.05 for the Fall 2010 semester, a continuation of an upward trend over the past few years.

According to the annual Fall Semester Enrollment Summary conducted by the University Registrar, the undergraduate population of 24,901 students, one of the highest ever, produced the highest cumulative GPA in at least five years.

Leading the academic charge was the Sinclair School of Nursing with a 3.43 GPA, and the Non-Divisional Department brought up the rear with a 2.63 average. The average male GPA was 2.95, and the average female GPA ended up at 3.18.

It was the second consecutive year MU had more than half of its major departments score above a 3.0, with seven out of 12 this year.

This fall semester was also the first time any department edged out the School of Journalism as the top ranked department in regards to grade point average.

School of Nursing Dean Judith Miller said she was not surprised at the success of her department.

“(Nursing) students are very industrious,” Miller said. “They know they have to have good grades. I think all of that attributes to them being high achievers, and them having the highest GPA of all the majors.”

Since the fall 2007 semester, the undergraduate GPA at MU has increased in small but regular increments. At 3.01 in 2007, MU’s GPA climbed to 3.03 in 2008, 3.04 in 2009 and 3.05 in 2010.

Sophomore Eric Brewster said he didn’t know the reason for the upward trend but attributed it to a stronger commitment to school work by incoming students.

“It could be that the public school system is better or that students are more committed,” Brewster said.

Vice Provost for Undergraduate Students Jim Spain said MU’s consistently strong GPA could be attributed to a few factors.

“We continue to increase the programs designed to help students be academically more successful,” Spain said.

Two developments Spain mentioned were increasing the availability of tutors and creating the Freshmen Interest Groups program.

“All of those things are designed to help students be more successful, and if they are indeed effective then you would expect student GPAs to increase over time,” Spain said.

In the past few years, seniors have had the highest GPA at MU, speaking to the survival-of-the-fittest aspect of many universities. Grade order also lines up with GPA, with juniors and then sophomores following the seniors in terms of GPA.

As for the usurped School of Journalism, Dean Miller said there is no need for worry.

“They have a national reputation, and nursing does, too,” she said. “We attract the best and brightest students as well as the best and brightest faculty.”

THE MANEATER

SFRC recommends student fee increase

The undergraduate student fee would increase by 0.78 percent.

By Kelly Olejnik

Published Jan. 28, 2011

The Student Fee Review Committee recommended a 0.78 percent increase in undergraduate student fees for the fiscal year 2012 to the UM System Board of Curators.

Six of the 18 student fee areas were recommended for an increase; two were for a decrease and nine for no change.

Most of the student fee increases were due to increasing costs and reductions in funding from other areas, SFRC Chairman Bryan Goers said.

“The offices and organizations requesting and receiving fee increases were facing potential salary increases next year and most of them had not received increases to their fees in a few years,” Goers said.

The Counseling Center is receiving the largest increase in student fees percentage-wise with a 21 percent increase. The percentage equates to a \$1.30 increase, totaling a \$7.79 fee.

“When (students) see a large percentage, they freak out,” said Matt Sheppard, new Secretary of Auxiliaries and member of the SFRC Committee. “Right now, the Counseling Center has seven less counselors than they should.”

According to the legislation, the mission of the Counseling Center is vital to the safety and betterment of students on campus and recommends more marketing, assuming the center can handle the influx of students.

Students will also see a 1.5 percent increase in their student health fee, equaling a \$1.39 increase.

“A lot of students use (Health Center) services and there are a lot who do not as well,” Goers said. “(SFRC) spent a lot of time talking about this and eventually recommended that they should receive an inflationary increase.”

A 2.3 percent decrease in the Org student fee has also been approved due to large amounts of carryover. In the past, SFRC had asked Org to take control of their carryover so students were receiving services while in school and not funding future years, Goers said.

“No action, that we saw, had been taken on Org’s part so we decided to reduce their funding and recommended to future committees to restore it if they do take action to reduce the carry forward,” he said.

The diversity fee has also had a past of large carryover, but will see no change in the 2012 fiscal year.

Although students will not see a change in the diversity fee, there are internal changes within the fee. How the fee is allocated to organizations will be changed to better use the money the fee generates, Goers said.

The diversity fee is divided between multiple organizations. Currently, 45 percent is allocated to the Legion of Black Collegians, 20 percent to the Asian American Association, 15 percent to the Hispanic American Leader Organization, 15 percent to Four Front, 5 percent to Triangle Coalition and the remainder is allocated to various student organizations and staff funding.

The internal changes will make the allocated percentage of the Triangle Coalition and Four Front both 10 percent to help reduce carryover, Goers said.

“The students in these organizations have signed off on the changes as well and because there were students involved in these changes the committee felt comfortable not making any changes to the fee and seeing how the internal changes work out,” he said in an e-mail. “We might recommend that internal changes should take place to help reduce carry forward but we do not tell organizations and offices how to spend the money they are allocated from student fees.”

THE MANEATER

Curators support barring voting student curator

Gov. Jay Nixon appointed three new curators in the past week.

By Sally French

Published Jan. 28, 2011

Gov. Jay Nixon made nominations to fill three of the four soon-to-be-vacant spots on the UM System Board of Curators this week, but the board supported an amendment Thursday that would eliminate the possibility of a voting student curator filling the fourth spot.

Mike Thomson, R-Maryville, filed House Bill 174 in light of Missouri's lost congressional district. Thomson's bill would permit "at least one but not more than two" curators from "each congressional district." Previously, the bill allowed one person from each congressional district to be appointed by Nixon to serve on the board.

"It seems to me that this is very consistent with the position the board has taken previously," UM System Board of Curators Chairman Warren Erdman said.

The board also said it believes its composition should remain the same, with each curator representing the public. This means that no curator should reflect any specific constituency group, such as students, faculty, staff, alumni or retirees. Consequently, the debate over whether the ninth curator spot will be filled by a student is put to rest.

The three new members nominated to the Board of Curators, the university's executive board, thanked Nixon for their selections this week but said they had no specific agendas yet for their time as curators.

On Tuesday, Nixon nominated St. Louis businessman David Steward to replace outgoing Curator David Wasinger.

Steward's term would end Jan. 1, 2017, and the nomination is subject to confirmation by the Missouri State Senate.

"David Steward is one of this country's leading entrepreneurs and will bring a background of tremendous business experience and success to the Board of Curators," Nixon said in a news release. "I am pleased to nominate him to serve on the board of one of the nation's pre-eminent

university systems, as it continues to meet the challenge of providing an affordable, first-class higher education to its students."

Steward, a republican, is CEO of World Wide Technology, a company that provides technology products, services and supply chain solutions to customers around the world. WWT, founded in 1990, was ranked no. 201 in Forbes' list of America's largest private companies.

On Wednesday, Nixon announced his nomination to replace outgoing Curator John Carnahan, Cassville attorney David Cupps. "I have a great love for the University," Cupps said. "I think being a part of the University of Missouri community gives you a sense of how important it is to the State of Missouri."

Cupps said he has no plans for once he assumes his new position.

"I really don't have an agenda," he said. "I just hope to do what I can."

Cupps works at the law firm of Ellis, Cupps and Cole. If confirmed by the Missouri Senate, Cupps will represent the Seventh Congressional District. His term would end Jan. 1, 2017.

"I'm just a little overwhelmed right now," Cupps said. "I'm very grateful for the confidence the governor has in appointing me to this position. I hope to live up to that confidence."

Later Wednesday, Nixon announced the nomination of Columbia attorney Craig Van Matre to serve out the remainder of retired Curator Bo Fraser's term.

Van Matre, who has resided in Columbia since 1975, will represent the 9th Congressional District, and will remain on the board until Jan. 1, 2013. He is the president of the law firm of Van Matre, Harrison, Hollis, Pitzer and Taylor.

So far, Van Matre said he has only made one goal for once he's on board – to not make any mistakes.

"When the governor says he wants to appoint you to this position, you just can't turn him down," Van Matre said.

One of the major jobs the Board of Curators will have is finding a president.

"Finding someone to do his job is obviously very important," Van Matre said. "The university is the most important enterprise here. It's important not only from a statewide standpoint but to the city of Columbia."

Once he assumes his position on the Board of Curators, Van Matre will step down from his role as a member of the Coordinating Board for Higher Education, which he has held since 2010.

Van Matre said he does not plan on making any major changes to the UM system once he assumes the new role.

“The University of Missouri is an enormous undertaking,” he said. “There’s a lot of complexity to it and there’s a lot to learn before I try to make any changes.”

He said he wants to spend the first few months learning how the system works, instead.

“There are people here who have much more experience. It’d be totally presumptuous to say I have the right to make changes at this point in time. I guess that’s why they call it the ‘Show Me’ state.”

MISSOURIAN

Dual-console da Vinci surgical robot debuts at University Hospital

By Anne Koncki

January 27, 2011 | 5:57 p.m. CST

COLUMBIA — Last week, two patients at University Hospital underwent surgery. In direct contact with the patients was not a surgeon, though — it was a surgical robot.

The two operations were the first transoral robotic surgeries at University Hospital, due to the addition of the dual-console da Vinci Surgical System.

Dr. Jerry Rogers, chair of the Department of Surgery at MU Health Care, was present with two other surgeons from University Hospital to demonstrate the surgical system Thursday in the hospital's simulation lab.

"We're just at the beginning of this," Rogers said. "It's a significant addition not just for our program but for the whole mid-Missouri area."

The da Vinci Surgical Systems, named after Leonardo da Vinci, allow surgeons to operate through tiny holes in the body instead of a large, open incision.

"Most importantly for the patient, it means getting out of the hospital sooner," Rogers said.

Some patients are able to go home the day after their surgery with da Vinci systems, whereas pain from open procedures can keep them in the hospital longer.

The da Vinci Surgical System is not the best option for every procedure, though. There are no indications trauma surgery is suited for the robotic system, Rogers said.

Surgeries best suited for the systems include general surgery, urologic and prostate surgery, cardiac and non-cardiac thoracic surgery, oncology, gastrointestinal surgery, otolaryngology and colorectal surgery, according to the news release.

The minimally invasive surgeries performed by da Vinci systems lead to many benefits for patients undergoing surgery, including: smaller incisions, minimal scarring, shorter hospital stays, less blood loss, a reduced risk of infection and quicker return to daily activities, according to a MU Health Care news release.

Rogers said the surgeries result in "significantly less pain because the incisions are smaller."

Although the tiny robotic clasps are in direct contact with the patient, a surgeon controls the movement of the robot at all times.

It only takes a short demonstration of the da Vinci Surgical System to see the impact it can have on procedures. The two small, robotic clips work together. One clip makes room for the other to operate more effectively.

Dr. Jeff Jorgensen is a head and neck surgeon at the MU Health Center who used the system for the first time last week. He performed surgery on a patient with cancer of the tonsil and another with cancer of the palette.

“I think things went very smoothly,” he said of the procedures. “It (the dual-console surgical system) gives you a lot more range of motion.”

The University of Missouri Board of Curators approved the \$3.2 million investment for the dual-console surgical system on Dec. 10. The single-console da Vinci surgical robot arrived in mid-Missouri in 2008 at the Women's and Children's Hospital.

Although there are two surgeons fully trained to use systems, there are about six or seven in training, which lasts a week to 10 days.

Those undergoing surgery with the new system, Rogers said, will not have to pay more than what they would have to pay for traditional surgery.

“It’s amazing how much technology changes in just a short period of time,” Rogers said.

Thundersnow a natural, if unwelcome, phenomenon

Thundersnow! The mere mention of the Washington area's Wednesday night weather phenomenon conjures Nordic gods and Bjork lyrics -- but in fact it's not nearly so strange.

"It's basically a light flash that occurs during a snowstorm," said Walt Petersen, a physical scientist at NASA Marshall Space Flight Center. "It's relatively rare in the sense of observing it ... but it's not Armageddon."

Of about 10 million cloud-to-ground lightning flashes each year in the United States, fewer than a tenth of a percent of them are associated with thundersnow, Petersen said. Still, that's up to 1,000 flashes.

In layperson terms, thundersnow tends to occur when the temperature teeters around the freezing point, and particles high in the atmosphere -- some more icy than wet, and some more wet than icy -- collide. The friction creates lightning.

Snowstorms usually don't have the same intense swirling air currents typical of summertime thunderstorms, Petersen said. And it's those intense air currents at 20,000 to 30,000 feet above the Earth that force the electrifying collisions. On Wednesday, the air far above Washington did just that.

Patrick Market, a professor of atmospheric science at the University of Missouri, spent some time in the 1990s braving both the cold and the lightning to chase after thundersnow.

He didn't actually catch it, he said with some dismay, but he learned a little bit more about the phenomenon.

"There's enhanced rising motion [in the air], not drastically different than what we experience in the summertime," he said. "There's concentrated vertical motion -- that's one of the things we figured out."

And to what end? Market's work, along with others, has been put to use to make better forecasts. And based on yesterday's near-flawless predictions of when and where the snow would fall, the work has been put to good use.

"We do understand now what's going on [with predictions] far better than even 15 or 20 years ago," Market said.

Unfortunately, knowing what was coming didn't do much to stop the utter chaos that came along D.C.-area roadways. But at least thundersnow provided some visual entertainment throughout the 12-hour commutes.