The Star’s editorial | Nixon’s latest funding gambit deserves an ‘F’

With Missouri staring at another tough budget, Gov. Jay Nixon is floating some out-of-the-box ideas.

One that should sink immediately — if it hasn’t already — is the suggestion that five of the state’s public universities loan the state a total of $107 million out of their reserve funds.

The rationale is that cuts to the state’s higher education budget could be avoided by having reserve-rich schools front money to the state treasury. They would receive a portion back immediately in operating funds, and the rest of the money would be repaid over a seven-year period with money from the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority, known as MoHELA.

Nixon’s team is right to want to avoid cuts to higher education. Missouri’s public colleges and universities have never financially recovered from draconian cuts imposed on them over the last two decades.

But the idea of having the state borrow from university reserves creates the mistaken impression that at least five of Missouri’s public universities are flush with cash. Missourians may well wonder why schools with sufficient reserves to bail the state out of a budget jam are asking for tuition increases. Donors may have similar thoughts.

The reality is much more complex. The University of Missouri System — one of the five institutions on the governor’s list — doesn’t have a single reserve account. Rather, it has thousands of reserve accounts scattered among its four campuses and its hospital system. They have multiple purposes, including a self-insurance fund, parking accounts, planning for future maintenance and capital projects, and seed money for future labs and academic programs.

Some of the reserves were given by donors for restricted purposes. The system also uses reserves to borrow funds for capital projects and maintain a high credit rating.

“The idea that we have this nice, fat piggy bank waiting to be plucked is a false concept,” said Warren Erdman, chairman of the university system’s Board of Curators.

The idea of repaying interest-free loans from the universities out of the MoHELA fund over seven years is also dicey. Even if Nixon and current legislators would agree to such a plan, there is no guarantee that future governors and legislators would honor it.
In considering ideas for closing a budget shortfall that may reach $750 million, Nixon should work with the legislature to tap the rainy day fund to pay for emergency costs incurred this budget year from the Joplin tornado, flooding and other natural disasters.

And the governor should lend his support to the broad coalition that is pushing for a public vote to raise Missouri’s lowest-in-the-nation cigarette tax. That’s a far healthier option for improving the state’s finances than borrowing from university reserves.
Legislators seek budget talk with Nixon

By Rudi Keller

Monday, December 19, 2011

With Missouri facing a fiscal reckoning and new tax revenue seemingly off limits, legislative budget leaders want Gov. Jay Nixon to sit down for talks on spending issues.

Nixon wants the University of Missouri and four other state universities to lend the state $106 million for the coming year so he can avoid cutting higher education spending. That idea, coupled with a plan to make schools shoulder half the burden of state scholarship programs, ran into widespread criticism from both Democratic and Republican lawmakers.

The idea would need substantial cooperation from lawmakers to be viable. That’s why a meeting between Nixon and top lawmakers is necessary, said Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia.

Schaefer said he told Nixon at a recent Columbia event that he was ready for budget talks. And although not every issue is likely to be settled, Schaefer said the areas of disagreement would be limited.

“The more you can take off the table through agreement, the better it is to know where those final disagreements will be, instead of everyone heading into a completely dark room and groping around,” he said.

Nixon spokesman Scott Holste had not responded to a question about Schaefer’s suggestion by the Tribune’s deadline today.

Under Nixon’s plan for higher education, UM would provide the bulk of the $106 million. The state would repay the money over seven years by tapping the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority.

The state faces a $400 million to $750 million gap between revenue and spending requirements. For three years, federal stimulus program funds have covered the deficit, but that money now is gone.
Schaefer said the problem with the higher education proposal is that it requires legislative help, and Nixon hasn’t tried the idea out on lawmakers. “Those are the kind of deals that you can’t roll out if they require a third party to act and you haven’t even talked to them yet.”

Not only would lawmakers have to agree to write the budget to use the money, they also would have to pass a law directing the loan authority to make the payments.

A budget meeting would help lawmakers understand Nixon’s proposals and help the administration understand legislative attitudes, said Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia. Kelly is a member and ex-chairman of the House Budget Committee.

Nixon dislikes working with lawmakers, Kelly said. And heading into an election year, Nixon might see that he has little to gain, Kelly added. But without talks, he said, Nixon’s ideas might be dead on arrival.

“I don’t know if they are possible after a meeting, but they are impossible without collaboration,” Kelly said.

He said Nixon has, until recently, done a good job managing the state’s finances in tough times. But some of his actions have raised questions, and Nixon is being sued over his withholding of state funds.

An effort by Nixon to work out a budget plan will help repair damaged relationships, Kelly said.

“Virtually every single legislative budget person on either side of the aisle is tired of the governor’s high-handedness in regards to spending outside the appropriations process,” he said.
Moisture deficit may soon soak consumers
State’s farmers need wet winter.

Associated Press
Monday, December 19, 2011

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Missouri cropland is so dry from last summer’s extreme heat and lack of rainfall that University of Missouri researchers said the state would need 13 feet of snow this winter to make up for it.

That’s probably not going to happen, and The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported yesterday that the lack of moisture could soon have an impact on consumers.

“If we don’t get enough input over the next few months, we could go into the next season without enough moisture,” said Randy Miles, a soil scientist at the university. “Even though it might not be that amenable to some and it may create some slushy driving hazards and so on, from a soil moisture viewpoint, more snow and rain may be more valuable long-term.”

Missouri corn farmers lost about 24 million bushels of yield last summer, and soybean producers lost about 20 million bushels. Last month, the U.S. Department of Agriculture designated 101 Missouri counties as natural disaster areas, with one estimate putting the loss to the state’s grain farmers at nearly $350 million.

“In Mid-Missouri and particularly as you go southwest,” the soil “was pretty well depleted 4 to 6 feet down. There’s not much left there for plant growth,” Miles said. “We need to recharge the piggy bank, so to speak.”

Record drought conditions got the most attention in parts of Texas and Oklahoma, but Missouri was hit hard, too. In addition to crop farmers, the state’s dairy and cattle industries also are scrambl

Missouri is the nation’s third-largest producer of hay, but the summer conditions scorched pasture and forage lands, causing a shortage of the now-precious commodity.

That has caused farmers from neighboring states to ship what they can from Missouri to get through the winter.
“I had to drive 100 miles north to get it from a guy in Green Ridge,” said Darrel Franson, a cattle farmer who heads the Missouri Forage and Grassland Council. “In the half an hour I’m talking to him, his phone rings three times, with producers from Texas willing to buy anything he’s got at any price.”

Cattle ranchers and dairy farmers typically grow much of the hay they feed their animals, but this year they were forced to feed hay months earlier than they normally would have because pastureland was burnt up.

Some farmers are worried that producers won’t have enough to feed their animals by midwinter.

“In January or February, the farmer is going to take a walk out into his pasture and see his cows are thin. He’s going to run in and say, ‘Ma, the cows are awful thin.’ Then they’re going to look at the ground and see there’s no grass there,” Franson said. “They’re going to get on the phone to get some hay, and they won’t find any.”

Dairy farmers are facing not just a shortage in hay, but lower quality, as well. Dairy cows need better-quality hay to produce better milk, but hay that survives harsh summer conditions isn’t the most nutritious, meaning cows need more of it.

Because of that, producers are paying as much as $300 a ton for higher-quality hay, far higher than normal.

“This is going to be one of the toughest challenges I’ve seen in my lifetime, seeing these cows through the winter,” said Larry Purdom, head of the Missouri Dairy Association. “A lot of times in the past when hay prices were up, we could use corn, but that’s been at record highs, and that’s expensive now, too.”

Purdom said the state’s dairy herd has shrunk from 100,000 cows in recent years to about 90,000, and that could go even smaller as aging dairy farmers sell their cows and get out of the business instead of paying the higher feed prices.

“This is serious,” Purdom said. “We have eight or nine processing plants in the state, and if we don’t have milk for them, we’re worried they’ll take their operations somewhere else. And that means jobs.”
Farmers need big winter to offset a dry 2011

December 19, 2011 By Mike Lear

The federal agriculture department has declared 101 Missouri counties as drought disaster areas. Researchers at the University of Missouri tell the St. Louis Post-Dispatch the state will need 13 feet of snow this winter to compensate for the summer drought after the spring floods in many counties, and without a bad winter, soil moisture will be depleted for the spring planting season.

Researchers say Missouri grain farmers have lost about 350-milion dollars because of the dry weather this year.
Pujols, MU leave their pasts behind

By Bill Clark

Monday, December 19, 2011

A few year-end thoughts about the sports world.

PGoodbye, Albert Pujols. We won’t miss you. As spring training ended this past season, I wrote that if Albert wanted to be remembered in St. Louis as an equal to Stan Musial, he should have signed a blank contract and let the Cardinals fill in the numbers later.

They would have paid Albert enough to ensure the Pujols family’s future, and he would have been mentioned forever in the same breath with Stan the Man.

But greed got in the way, as it often does. St. Louis is now in Albert’s rearview mirror, and Stan the Man is only a faded memory as Albert now can count the most dollars in major league history as a Los Angeles Angel. Dead presidents obviously mean a lot more than standing alongside Musial.

Come spring, someone else will play first base in St. Louis. The city is the best baseball town in the United States.

The fans will forgive Albert, but they’ll be there to root for the next first baseman and the 2012 Redbirds because they are Cardinals fans. Period.

In baseball, one player does not make a champion. The Cardinals in 2011 were a good example. The sun will rise on opening day in St. Louis without Albert Pujols, and life will go on.

Add another starting pitcher, and the Cardinals make the playoffs the right way, winning instead of depending on another Atlanta Braves collapse.

POff the University of Missouri goes to the Southeastern Conference. More money, the word is. More stability, the word is. I asked one of MU’s deans about improved finances and stability in his department with the switch.

You know the answer: zilch.
A fan recently called The Kansas City Star, commenting that if MU thinks it is leaving KU basketball behind, think again. Now you get to rearrange the letters and play UK twice each season. Good luck. UK? That’s the University of Kentucky. Ouch.

Enjoy the Independence Bowl. It might be MU’s last bowl game for a while. Getting six wins in the SEC means MU will need to open the season with three cream puffs, as usual.

POI’ Clark wrote a column last spring thanking Mike Anderson for his years at MU restoring Tigers basketball to respectability after the Quin Snyder era and wishing him the best at the University of Arkansas, his longtime home.

I have no way to verify what seems obvious about the current Tigers team, but I’d bet Mike told this group to stay together, to play for MU and for Frank Haith and show just how good they are.

With no key player left, the club settled in with a coach the alumni didn’t want, a coach the media questioned, a coach who almost immediately wound up in an NCAA investigation initiated by a convicted felon.

The Tigers worked hard all summer and opened the season with 11 straight wins, ranked 10th in the nation, beating three ranked teams along the way.

The season is long and winding, and the Big 12 is a basketball minefield, but MU looks up to the journey. Now, turn out and support this hardworking crew and a very successful coach no one wanted nine months ago.

Missourians are in line for a playoff in the National Football League. There is a rumor the NFL is looking at matching the Kansas City Chiefs with the St. Louis Rams for the right to meet the Indianapolis Colts for the title of the NFL’s worst team. The line on the game: a tossup.

Columbia sports fans are fortunate to have a voice of reason in their midst. The voice belongs to Tribune Sports Editor Joe Walljasper.

There’s no cheering from the press box with Joe. He’s an analyst, not a fan, quite capable of putting his analysis in readable, understandable English. And he’s a backyard birder, to boot.
MU researchers' campaign targets gay smokers

By Janese Silvey

Monday, December 19, 2011

Smoking rates are higher among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered Missourians than among the general population, and a team of University of Missouri researchers aims to figure out what to do about it.

Associate Professor Kevin Everett and Assistant Professor Jane McElroy of the Family & Community Medicine Department have spent several years collecting data that confirm the smoking rate disparity. They found that 35 percent to 40 percent of subgroups within the LGBT community in Missouri are smokers, compared with 21 percent of the general population.

Their work has been funded by the Missouri Foundation for Health, a St. Louis-based non-governmental group that invests in community health activities. It recently gave the team a $315,700 funding boost to pilot new smoking cessation programs targeting the LGBT community.

“One of the challenges we’re beginning to learn about is that certain populations and groups receive marginalized health care services,” Everett said. “We haven’t done a good job presenting smoking cessation to that community. We plan to take the information we’ve learned over the last couple of years and — working with the community and an advisory board we interact with — develop some educational campaigns to highlight the high smoking rates and also bring awareness to the treatments known to work.”

For instance, Everett said, “something we’ve found is that the community doesn’t have a very good knowledge of what works, like nicotine patches.”

The research team plans to set up smoking cessation services in LGBT centers where visitors know they will not be discriminated against. Everett said he plans to work with three LGBT centers in the St. Louis area to provide free nicotine replacements, coaching and counseling services.

“The core difference will be where they’re located and who’s delivering the services,” he said.

Researchers also will aim to boost communication efforts, including eventually launching a website, outproudandhealthy.org, McElroy said.
“It’s not live yet, but it will take a more holistic approach to living a healthy lifestyle in the LGBT community,” she said. “We’re becoming aware that it’s important to not say, ‘You need to stop smoking,’ but instead say, ‘You need to be healthy.’”

Grant funds will support a video competition the team plans to launch next year. Inspired by the “It Gets Better” campaign, it will ask participants to record vignettes promoting healthy living. McElroy hopes to screen the winning film at a local film festival.

MU’s LGBTQ Resource Center refers students to the nearby Wellness Resource Center for smoking cessation programs, coordinator Struby Struble said.

“Our focus more is on what is causing our students to smoke,” she said. “Similar to other underrepresented populations, there are oppressions and discrimination, and they’re learning how to deal with that stress.

“Smoking is not a healthy coping mechanism, so we always try to teach our students — same with any college student trying to figure out their life — to know the different resources available to them and how to get involved in healthy ways.”

Researchers are still trying to better understand the smoking rate disparity, but the tobacco industry appears to be partly to blame. Tobacco companies target LGBT communities by sponsoring gay pride festivals and events where smoking is allowed and advertising in specialty publications.

Stress also plays a role. “We know that there are unique stressors to being LGBT,” Everett said, “and stress has always been known to be a major factor when starting to smoke or continuing to smoke.”
U.S. Health Panel Takes Heat on Cancer Screening Advice

By Alina Selyukh
Dec 19 2011, 12:06 PM ET

Controversial rulings on breast cancer exams -- and the death threats that followed -- have forced an agency to review its methods

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Dr. Ned Calonge knows firsthand how hard it is to tell Americans they'd be better off with fewer routine medical tests.

A long-time family doctor in Colorado, Calonge presided over the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, an influential government-backed panel of health experts, when it said that most women under 50 could skip their regular mammograms.

The recommendation two years ago challenged the conviction of many breast cancer patients that they survived precisely because they were screened early. It unleashed a public fury that has weighed on the panel's deliberations ever since.

"We blew the message," said Calonge, now president and CEO of the Colorado Trust foundation. "The nuance was completely gone."

Two men phoned in death threats to Calonge. Protesters showed up by the offices of the government agency that supports the panel, tucked away in a Maryland suburb. The furor slowed down work on a decision to limit prostate cancer screenings as President Barack Obama fought to pass his signature healthcare law and his Democratic party faced a mid-term election challenge in 2010.

"There was a lot of pressure from above to be more careful politically and orchestrate things better," said Dr. Kenneth Lin, who at the time was an officer at the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), a Department of Health and Human Services entity that supports the panel. "Everything with the word 'cancer' got shoved back."

Calonge rotated off the panel this past March after eight years, while Lin quit AHRQ late last year in protest over the delay to prostate cancer screening guidelines that were only released in October. A White House official noted that Calonge has attributed the delay in a final decision on prostate cancer screenings to scheduling conflicts.
Their experience shows just how difficult it will be to curb spiraling costs in the world's most expensive healthcare system by determining what screenings work, based on a rigorous study of clinical evidence, and what can lead to unnecessary and risky procedures.

"More screening is not always better," said Dr. Christine Laine, a general internist and editor of the Annals of Internal Medicine who is not part of the panel. "That message is lost in healthcare in general."

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force is right on the firing line. For much of its 27-year history, it helped convince millions of Americans to get screened early for disease.

Now the panel of primary care doctors, nurses and academics has reviewed a growing body of research that shows some early screening harms more people than it helps. But it has struggled to convince patients and doctors.

In the wake of the mammogram guidelines, the rate of such screenings for women aged 40 to 69 was barely changed in 2010 compared with 2009, according to the National Committee for Quality Assurance.

"We have a public health measure that we know is effective. Why is it continually being questioned?" said Dr. Carol Lee, breast imaging commission chairwoman at the American College of Radiology.

BROACHING THE NEGATIVES

The public at large is no less skeptical. A recent Gallup poll showed that nearly 60 percent of Americans believed that standard cancer screenings - including mammograms and prostate specific antigen (PSA) blood tests - were performed often enough. Thirty-one percent thought they should be conducted more frequently. Only 7 percent said they were done too often.

"It's extraordinarily hard to give up the notion that there's a way to protect yourself from dying from cancer... Our goal here is to make it a matter of evidence, not a matter of opinion," said Virginia Moyer, a pediatrician from Baylor College of Medicine, who now chairs the 16-member panel.

"Our successes are measured in positives," she said of the public's growing awareness of screening in the last three decades. "We are just beginning to approach the negatives."

Burned by the experience with mammograms, the task force is looking for a better way to deliver the message, consulting with powerful consumer interest groups, hiring public relations professionals and reworking some of the language tied to its system of letter-based recommendations.

"We're spending more time paying attention to how we say things to make sure it's understood well," said long-time panel member and current co-vice chair Dr. Michael LeFevre, a professor of family medicine at the University of Missouri School of Medicine. "We have no interest in being some wizard behind the curtain."

The panel now issues its recommendations in draft form first and solicits public comment before making them final. In about a year, the public may have a chance to chime in early on the evaluation process, including posing questions for researchers and reviewing the evidence report draft used by the panel.
Task force officials concede that the comments are unlikely to change the recommended letter grade, unless they introduce crucial new evidence. But they can point to misunderstandings and help the panel better craft its message.

In late October, the panel met with consumer interest groups, including retired persons lobby AARP and the Consumers Union, to get input on how to frame recommendations that was once reserved for patient advocates.

The public's participation has been unprecedented. The panel is now finalizing its PSA prostate cancer recommendation and public comments on the subject have reached into the thousands, LeFevre said.

WEIGHING THE EVIDENCE

The 2009 mammogram guidance from the task force was based on the panel's assessment of new research that showed most women over 40 face a 3 percent risk of dying from breast cancer if they have not been screened. Beginning mammogram screening at age 50 and following up every other year reduced that risk to 2.3 percent, compared with 2.2 percent risk starting at age 40.

An extra decade of screening could invite harms such as unnecessary biopsies and tests, the possible treatment of non-deadly cancers and radiation. Women in their forties are also more likely to receive false positive results.

Another view of the data showed that starting screening at age 40 led to 5,000 more mammograms, 500 false positive results and 33 biopsies for every breast cancer death prevented, according to LeFevre.

"If it was just how many deaths do you cause versus how many deaths you prevent, that would be too easy, that would be simple math," LeFevre said. "We start with somebody who feels well, and we risk making them feel worse."

The panel voted on a "C" recommendation, which calls for patients to decide on the screening with their doctor. But when the recommendation came out in November 2009, it started with a sentence saying the panel "recommends against" routine mammograms for most women under 50, and that language triggered the controversy.

Under pressure, the task force dropped the phrase "recommends against" a month later. Its rating on mammograms remains a "C."

The American Cancer Society questioned the evidence, saying the panel focused on gold-standard clinical trials but weeded out newer observational studies that showed better results.

"Screening is not perfect and it's not error-free, but the question is... do you take protective measures against the unlikely probability that you develop cancer... or do you take your chances?" said Robert Smith, director of cancer screening at the ACS.

That calculation still appears to be guiding doctors, either out of concern of missing an early sign of disease or fear of lawsuits, health experts said.

"Shared decision-making (between doctors and patients) sounds nice, but in practice usually you just end up doing the test," said Dr. Roger Chou, an internist and researcher at the Oregon Evidence-Based
Practice Center. Chou authored the report on prostate cancer behind this year's task force recommendation.

POLITICAL RUMBLINGS

The heat over mammograms weighed on deliberations over prostate cancer screening. In 2008, the task force gave an "I" recommendation on the PSA test in healthy men under 75, which meant it had insufficient evidence to make a call.

The panel usually updates its recommendations every five years, but new research published in 2009 warranted an earlier evaluation. One U.S. study showed a slightly higher risk of death for men with no symptoms of illness who received a PSA test, while European research showed a slightly lower risk of death.

Although the PSA blood test itself is innocuous, data reviewed by the task force also showed that 90 percent of American men who tested positive got treated, even if they may have been able to forego it, LeFevre said. Out of 1,000 men treated, five would die, 70 would have serious complications and 200 to 300 would be impotent or incontinent.

Given the possibility of false positives in the screening and the fact that prostate cancer can take many years to progress and show symptoms, the question is whether those risks are greater than the risk of doing nothing.

"It looks like your chance of being alive and well is greater if you don't get screened than if you do get screened," LeFevre said.

In November 2009, task force members voted on a stronger "D" rating on PSA tests, meaning they recommended against the prostate cancer screening in men under 75.

But the timing was poor as Obama struggled to win over a majority of lawmakers for his healthcare overhaul and Congressional elections loomed large. Once the law was passed in March 2010, it brought more attention to the task force by mandating insurance coverage of services it does recommend.

Republicans opposed to the bill used the mammogram example to show how government could intrude on life or death decisions. The task force's "C" and "D" recommendations don't dictate insurance coverage, but Congress quickly turned around legislation to make sure insurers covered mammograms for women in their forties.

"The thought that my work was being use as a fulcrum by one party to kill the most substantial part of healthcare legislation since I've been in practice? I've got to tell you, that's something to lose sleep over," Calonge said.

Officials working with the panel heard that more controversy could threaten the task force budget, up for Congressional approval. In 2010, Health Department funding for the panel was $4.3 million. This year, the agency overseeing the panel spent about $11 million on work related to the task force.

Calonge says the panel wanted more evidence of how the tests could harm healthy patients, and ordered further research. He canceled a new vote on PSA screenings in November 2010, citing scheduling problems, a decision that was widely criticized.
"In my heart of hearts I'd really like to believe that we'd delay it anyway," without the surrounding politics, Calonge said. "We were trying to make the recommendations solid."

That was too much for Lin, who believed the evidence was already enough to show the public was at risk. After talking with his pastor and his wife, he quit AHRQ.

"Even delaying it for a few months, much less a year, it was really relegating the men to the harms they were exposed to," Lin said.