

JAN 18 2012

Nixon's budget hits higher ed hard

By Rudi Keller

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JEFFERSON CITY – Colleges and universities took the biggest hit Tuesday when Gov. Jay Nixon unveiled his budget for the coming year, losing \$105.9 million or 12.5 percent of their state support.

The University of Missouri will absorb \$45 million of that cut, reducing its state support to \$348.5 million – the lowest level since 1996.

In his State of the State speech, Nixon did not refer specifically to the amount he intended to cut from higher education.

As he touted areas where he's held the line – scholarships will get \$25 million more general revenue next year to replace funds from a one-time source – Nixon said that increase and other priorities “means we'll have to cut in other areas. So to balance our budget in a way that protects scholarships and academic programs, I am calling on all our colleges and universities to continue to look for more ways to cut overhead and administrative costs and run smarter, more efficient operations.”

Nixon would not comment on the cuts when approached in the Capitol hallways after his speech.

The cuts are necessary to make up a \$500 million shortfall between revenues and spending demands, said Linda Luebbering, state budget director. Other areas for savings include Medicaid, where the state will find savings by holding the line on payments to managed care companies, and state employment, where Nixon intends to eliminate 816 jobs. Most of those positions will be jobs that will not be filled, Luebbering said.

There are a few places where Nixon is adding spending. He's giving state workers a 2 percent raise next Jan. 1, which will cost the state \$23.6 million. And he's adding \$5 million to the state foundation formula for public schools, allowing him to say it is the highest allotment for public education in state history.

And there is uncertainty in Nixon's proposal – \$64 million of the \$8.02 billion general revenue budget depends on tax amnesty legislation that failed to win passage last year.

The reaction among lawmakers was swift and, for the most part, negative. While it might seem easy to take the raises from state employees to mitigate the higher education cuts, that's not the way it should be viewed, said Rep. Stephen Webber, D-Columbia.

“My problem is pitting two groups of hardworking people against each other,” Webber said. “We have cut taxes for years, and now there is no money for either group and they are fighting over the scraps.”

Senate President Pro Tem Rob Mayer, R-Dexter, said he wanted Nixon to present a budget that did not rely on lawmakers to pass new revenue measures. “This one again relies on shell games to be balanced,” Mayer said.

Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, said the tight budget will hem lawmakers in as they seek to make changes. Last year, when lawmakers restored a bit of the money Nixon cut from higher education, it was withheld when the budget year began and it has not been released.

Nixon even went further than his originally proposed cut when dealing with the UM budget in order to punish the school for raising tuition at its four campuses by more than 5 percent.

“The budget for the past three years has been balanced on the back of higher education,” he said.

Asked if the deep cut provides cover for a massive tuition hike, Schaefer said that is up to the Board of Curators. “I don't think it is a green light to raise tuition as high as they want, but with a 12.5 percent cut to the University of Missouri, it is the curators' job to evaluate what that means.”

Rep. Chris Kelly, the senior lawmaker in the House, noted that Nixon has spent much of his speech talking about the courage of ordinary Missourians -- including those who battled for the lives in the Joplin tornado and a state trooper who lost his life in the line of duty.

“The face of courage for public officials in the state of Missouri would be a willingness to take the heat for doing what is right on the cigarette tax,” Kelly said. “It is not a mark of distinction that it is the lowest in the country.”

The cuts Nixon is proposing are devastating to the university and will have a direct, negative effect on education quality, Kelly said.

“To talk about administrative overhead is misleading,” he said.

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Nixon calls for cuts to Missouri budget

BY VIRGINIA YOUNG • vyoung@post-dispatch.com > 573-635-6178 AND JAKE WAGMAN • jwagman@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8268 | Posted: Wednesday, January 18, 2012 12:15 am

JEFFERSON CITY • In three years of presiding over Missouri's recession-ravaged finances, Gov. Jay Nixon has become known for cutting the budget in ways that he tries to make sound painless.

Nixon stayed true to form Tuesday night, outlining a spending blueprint that slashes 12.5 percent from public universities' funding, shrinks the state workforce by 816 positions and relies on nearly \$200 million in savings in Medicaid, the health care program for the poor.

"Smarter, more efficient operations" will cover those cuts and help the state avoid red ink without raising taxes, an upbeat Nixon told legislators in his annual State of the State speech delivered in the House chamber.

His top priorities, Nixon said, include investing a record \$3.009 billion in basic aid to K-12 public schools and preserving the current level of college scholarship funding at \$105.5 million.

"I haven't met one parent or one teacher in Missouri who thinks we should balance the budget by taking money from kids' classrooms," he said.

Senate Republican leaders reacted to Nixon's claims of a balanced \$23 billion budget with skepticism. Senate President Pro Tem Rob Mayer, R-Dexter, said the governor was relying on 'shell games' — measures such as a proposed tax amnesty for scofflaws, which would need Legislative approval first.

"I would have liked to see more specifics — more leadership — on how we balance this budget," Mayer said.

State Sen. Kurt Schaefer, the Appropriations Committee chairman whose district includes the University of Missouri flagship campus in Columbia, called the proposed cuts to higher education "unacceptable."

"Can public universities survive that type of cut?" Schaefer asked.

The governor, a Democrat seeking re-election this year, invoked the perseverance of storm-ravaged Joplin, along with a few subtle political jabs, to push his agenda, much of which lawmakers have seen before.

He urged passage of a jobs plan that focuses on increasing exports and beefing up incentives to lure technology jobs and automobile manufacturing suppliers; he once again called on the Legislature to rein in state tax credits.

The governor also called on lawmakers to put an end to unlimited campaign contributions, another repeat request, and for greater accountability on charter schools.

Nixon cited the litany of natural disasters that have befallen the state since he last took the podium a year ago — not just the devastating Joplin tornado, but the flooding around the state and the twister that touched down in St. Louis on Good Friday — to show "we've seen our share of tough times."

"But we didn't make excuses. We didn't wait around for help," Nixon's speech said. "Yes, times have been tough. But Missourians have always been tougher."

Nixon said, "Missourians don't want a bailout" — a possible dig at Nixon's GOP rival, St. Louis businessman Dave Spence, who served on the board of a St. Louis bank that took federal TARP funds.

Nixon promoted his jobs package, the "Missouri Works" plan, that he introduced previously in appearances around the state. The plan calls for state incentives for automobile suppliers once they have reached certain investment and job-creation benchmarks.

Nixon has wooed the auto industry since he took office in 2009. He said he visited Detroit last week for face-to-face meetings with Ford and GM.

"I was there for one reason: to get more auto parts suppliers to invest in the Show-Me State," he said.

"Whether they're making seats or steering wheels, axles or airbags, we want suppliers to bring more of those jobs to Missouri."

The governor's speech also signaled he will revive the fight with the Legislature over taking a bite out of the tax credits available to builders for historic preservation and low-income housing.

"Effective tax credits are used to create jobs and grow our economy. But tax credits that aren't delivering for Missourians must be retooled and reformed," he said.

Nixon's jobs platform also calls for expanding opportunities for businesses to export goods abroad. The state, Nixon said, will soon open trade offices in China, Southeast Asia and South America.

Nixon has maintained strong approval ratings even while President Barack Obama's have remained low in the state, and the governor sought to distance himself from officials in Washington by calling on Republicans to approve his proposal to eliminate 816 state government jobs. That reduction would bring the total positions cut during his term to 4,181.

Earlier, his budget director, Linda Luebbering, told reporters that officials hope to reduce the state workforce through attrition rather than layoffs. The plan includes a reduction of eight jobs from the governor's office staff, an election-year move that differs from Nixon's previous budgets.

While there would be fewer state employees, those who remained would get a 2 percent pay raise, effective Jan. 1, 2013. Their last salary boost was in 2009, Luebbering said.

Nixon and legislative budget leaders have agreed to base next year's budget on projected growth of 3.9 percent, or about \$285 million. But that growth is insufficient to offset the end of federal stimulus money and a reduction in the rate the federal government pays for Medicaid. That's why Nixon had to find \$508 million in cuts.

The biggest chunk of savings was \$191.7 million from Medicaid, the state-federal program that pays for health care for the poor. But no one on the Medicaid rolls will lose eligibility, a result, in part, of federal requirements.

Rather, Luebbering said the money would come from "efficiencies" such as increasing the use of generic drugs and maximizing federal matching funds for nursing home residents.

Luebbering said higher education was targeted for major cuts because "quite frankly, we don't have the money."

In his speech, Nixon said universities should "run smarter, more efficient operations" to cope with his cuts, implying that they should avoid tuition increases.

Despite the fiscal doldrums, his budget proposes a few modest new initiatives, such as \$4 million to lure high-tech jobs under the Missouri Science and Innovation Reinvestment Act.

Nixon also emphasized the need to ensure jobs for returning veterans by expanding training for those who have recently left the military.

The governor pushed the Legislature for a measure to crack down on charter schools that "aren't up to par academically."

School-choice advocates have been funded by wealthy political benefactor Rex Sinquefield — who himself was the apparent target of a Nixon barb.

Calling for a reinstatement of the caps on campaign contribution limits, Nixon's speech warned that "one person with an ax to grind can make an unlimited contribution to advance a narrow agenda."

Sinquefield has donated millions of dollars to advance education and fiscal goals, including an attempt to replace the state income tax.

Nixon threw some bouquets to public education, a target of the Republican-led Legislature intent on eliminating teacher tenure and expanding school choice options. Nixon called teaching "a high calling."

Noting that St. Louis Public Schools' attendance rate is now 93 percent and test scores are improving, Nixon said the unaccredited district's schools were "finding their footing and moving in the right direction."

The loudest, and most unified, ovation of the night was not for the governor, but his guests from Joplin, including a teenager, Quinton Anderson, who lost both his parents in the storm.

At the end of his speech, Nixon came back to Quinton, and hopes for "brighter days ahead."

"Quinton, I pledge to you that we will continue to work together to take that extra step," the governor said, "and keep Missouri moving forward."

Nixon proposes \$106 million cut from Missouri higher ed

By JASON HANCOCK

NO MU MENTION

JEFFERSON CITY - Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon rolled out a budget Tuesday night that would cut higher education funding by more than \$100 million while increasing state aid for K-12 education.

In his fourth State of the State address, and his final one before he stands for re-election, Nixon laid out an agenda that cuts \$508 million from the state's budget, including reducing the state payroll by 816 jobs — to the lowest level in 15 years.

All this, he said, would help balance the state's finances without increasing taxes.

“Other states have not shown that fiscal discipline,” Nixon said. “More than 30 states have raised taxes, including Kansas and Illinois. But we have not. Because we know that Missouri families can't afford a tax increase. Period.”

Although higher education takes a hit, Nixon proposes increasing funding for K-12 schools by \$5 million. However, the total amount is still nearly \$500 million less than what is called for by the state's school funding formula.

“I haven't met one parent or one teacher in Missouri who thinks we should balance our budget by taking money from their kids' classroom,” Nixon said.

Nixon also called on lawmakers to pass a charter school accountability bill that holds all schools “to high standards of academic achievement and financial integrity.”

Republican lawmakers were quick to dismiss Nixon's plan to cut \$106 million from higher education, a total that would be a 12.5 percent reduction from the 2012 budget. Senate Appropriations Chairman Kurt Schaefer, a Republican from Columbia, said the cuts were unacceptable. Universities have seen their budgets cut for three straight years.

“At some point, we're going to have to accept responsibility for funding our public universities,” he said.

Nixon said the state's universities and colleges will have to change their business models.

"I am calling on all our colleges and universities to continue to look for more ways to cut overhead and administrative costs and run smarter, more efficient operations," Nixon said.

House Minority Leader Mike Talbot, a Democrat from Kansas City, worried that university administrators might have already done all they can.

"I don't know how much more efficient they can get," he said.

The state's projected 2013 budget was expected to face a \$500 million shortfall thanks to an end to federal stimulus funds and a reduction in the rate the federal government pays for Medicaid. To help fill that budget gap, Nixon's plan relies on \$191 million in Medicaid savings, mostly obtained through efficiencies without changes to eligibility or covered services, and from \$52 million in increased revenue from a tax amnesty plan that twice failed to clear the legislature last year.

Senate President Pro Tem Rob Mayer, a Republican from Dexter, said the governor's overall budget, despite Nixon's claims, is not balanced because it relies on ideas like tax amnesty, which have proved difficult to reach consensus on in recent years.

"From just looking at the budget figures he's giving us, we're more than \$100 million short, which is not acceptable," Mayer said.

Nixon's budget plan also calls for state employees to receive a 2 percent raise, starting Jan. 1, 2013. Schaefer called the idea of giving state workers a raise — their first since 2009 — a "reasonable" idea, if they can find a way to cover the \$23.6 million price tag.

Nixon also called for the legislature to take up his "Missouri Works" program, an idea he has rolled out in recent weeks that he says could spur more jobs among auto parts suppliers, increase international exports, and offer job-training subsidies for companies that hire military veterans.

The plan also calls for \$4 million in funding for the Missouri Science and Innovation Reinvestment Act, known as MOSIRA. That would fund incentives for science- and technology-based companies.

Linda Luebbering, Nixon's budget director, said that of the 816 projected job cuts in the governor's budget, the bulk would be accomplished by attrition. Of those, more than 600 come from the Department of Transportation. The next biggest chunk comes from the Department of Social Services.

Luebbering insisted that despite the reduction in workforce, there will be no impact on state services.

Amy Blouin, executive director of The Missouri Budget Project — an organization that analyzes financial issues with an emphasis on their effect on the poor — slammed the governor's proposal

for relying on cuts alone to deal with a budget shortfall. Instead, he should be willing to increase state revenues to deal with budget problems.

“While the governor mentions the need for job creation, these cuts will make it harder for students to get the quality education they need to compete in the global economy and for Missouri to attract jobs to our state,” she said.

Talbot echoed Blouin’s concerns, saying he would have liked to have seen some revenue increase measures, especially collecting Internet sales taxes.

“Unfortunately, I’m in the minority on that,” he said.

Throughout his speech, Nixon struck an upbeat tone, pledging to work with lawmakers from both parties to “move Missouri toward brighter days ahead.”

“Whether you’re from the big city, or a small town. Whether you make your living on the farm, or in a lab. Whether you’re a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent — or none of the above. We’re all Missourians first,” he said. “And here in Missouri, we’re not defined by our differences. We’re defined by our shared values.”

Columbia lawmakers have mixed reactions to Nixon's plans for 2013

By Karen Miller, Blaine Duncan

January 17, 2012 | 11:09 p.m. CST

JEFFERSON CITY — Columbia's legislators reacted with mixed emotions to proposed higher education cuts after Gov. Jay Nixon's State of the State speech Tuesday night.

Nixon is proposing to fill the \$500 million gap in Missouri's fiscal year 2013 budget by slashing funding for the state's four-year colleges and universities by \$89 million. This is a nearly 13 percent reduction in these institutions' current funding levels. The UM System would see its operating budget cut by more than \$55 million.

Sen. Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, who represents both Boone and Randolph counties and who issued a response on behalf of the legislature's Republican members, described the proposed cuts to the universities' funding as "unacceptable."

"The state's budget has been balanced for three straight years on the back of higher education," he said in a statement to reporters.

Rep. Stephen Webber, D-Columbia, said that recent tax cuts were the real reason for the budget shortfall.

"Last year we made a conscious decision as a General Assembly to cut taxes on large multinational corporations," Webber said. "They pay less tax this year than they did last year. That directly translates into us not having money to fund our schools."

Webber said he would rather see an online sales tax adopted, which he said would more than cover Nixon's proposed cuts to higher education.

Rep. Mary Still, D-Columbia, was disappointed by the cuts to higher education. Still, along with fellow Democratic Rep. Chris Kelly of Columbia, is looking at other options of raising revenue for higher education — this includes an online sales tax bill and a bill to raise the cigarette tax.

"There's no redeeming value to having the lowest cigarette tax in the country," Still said. She also said that a bill for an online sales tax in Missouri would protect local businesses. Currently, items purchased from national online retailers are not subject to Missouri sales tax.

The bill for online sales tax has already been filed and the bill on a cigarette tax increase is expected to be filed this week, Still said.

Nixon's proposed budget provides stable funding for state college scholarship programs such as Access Missouri, A+ program, and Bright Flight. However, both Still and Kelly said that the cuts to higher education funding will effect the quality of Missouri universities and colleges.

"You have to ask yourself, where's the line between access and quality?" Kelly said, " ... having accessibility to institutions of decreasing quality is not a benefit."

Nixon called on colleges and universities to make up for the cuts by reducing overhead costs and being more efficient.

Senate President Pro Tem Rob Mayer, R-Dexter, likewise indicated that the proposed cuts to the state's colleges and universities would have a difficult time clearing the Senate and said that he would be working with Senate Republicans to lessen the reduction.

Although Columbia legislators spoke out against cuts to higher education, they did note that there were many positive points in Nixon's speech.

Still supported Nixon's stance on protecting workers and his proposals for job creation.

"We need to have people making more money, not less," she said. Kelly said Nixon has done well in the area of economic development, referring to bringing IBM to Columbia in May 2010.

"His credibility is sky-high on the issue of job development," Kelly said.

Nixon's budget presented before his speech on Tuesday night is not final. It must pass a vote in the House and the Senate before going into effect in July.



UM complaint hotline busier after change Nonfiscal issues are now allowed.

By Janese Silvey

Tuesday, January 17, 2012

The University of Missouri System last year fielded dozens of complaints, including several — an interoffice affair, a gnat infestation and falsified prescriptions — that prompted administrative action.

More than 60 complaints were filed through the system's ethics and compliance hotline in 2011. That's up from 14 complaints of fiscal misconduct reported through the system in 2010. The spike is likely because the 5-year-old hotline was expanded in early 2011 to include nonfiscal concerns, UM spokeswoman Jennifer Hollingshead said.

The university pays a third party, Global Compliance, \$6,700 annually to operate the program, which lets whistle-blowers anonymously file complaints that administrators then investigate. In most cases, no action was deemed necessary, according to a log of complaints obtained through an open records request.

Administrators took action on 14 complaints filed last year, most of which involved the MU campus or MU Health Care.

In one case, administrators took action after learning through the hotline that an MU manager and a subordinate were romantically involved. The person who complained worried the subordinate was getting preferential treatment.

University policies prohibit such relationships, spokeswoman Mary Jo Banken said. When relationships do form between supervisors and employees, the supervisor is expected to report the relationship to an administrator and to cooperate when managerial duties are reassigned, she said.

Banken did not know details of the complaint filed but said the fact that action was taken indicates the situation was resolved.

A complaint in January 2011 also prompted administrators to treat a campus machine shop that had been infested with gnats or fruit flies. Banken would not disclose the location of the shop, saying doing so could jeopardize the identity of the complainant.

MU administrators also took action on concerns that a faculty member was inappropriately using an emeritus title, a campus employee was using inappropriate language and an employee used a university vehicle for personal business.

At MU Health Care, administrators had to take action after a parent who took two children to the doctor for the same service was billed nearly twice as much for one child's visit than the other child's.

In that case, appropriate action was taken, "but just because a problem is found, keep in mind, doesn't mean there was any violation of policy or law," Banken said. "It could have been merely an error or misunderstanding or mistake."

Health care administrators also took action after someone complained an employee was falsifying medical documents and trying to get drugs using falsified prescriptions.

"Any time a complaint is made, we investigate thoroughly," spokeswoman Mary Jenkins said, declining to answer questions about specific situations. "If we find a complaint to be substantiated, we take the appropriate action."

At the UM System level, administrators took action after someone complained a system employee threatened an outside party before the start of a surplus auction.

An investigation is pending after someone complained last month that a UM System employee sent negative information about someone's spouse to an external party considering the spouse for a volunteer position.



Missouri to receive MLK memorial replica

Posted: Jan 18, 2012 4:05 AM CST Updated: Jan 18, 2012 4:05 AM CST

COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) - A University of Missouri graduate who helped lead the effort to create the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial is bringing a piece of the new tribute to the slain civil rights leader to Columbia.

The school plans to honor King at a Jan. 25 celebration at the Missouri Theatre featuring television writer Larry Wilmore, a correspondent on "The Daily Show" with Jon Stewart.

A smaller replica of the King monument will be presented by Ty Christian, a 1977 Missouri graduate who was chief marketing strategist for the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation.

The city of Columbia installed a King memorial garden and public sculpture park in 1993 along a popular pedestrian trail.

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

MU to receive replica of Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial

By Amy Willsey

January 17, 2012 | 4:59 p.m. CST

COLUMBIA – MU will receive a replica sculpture of the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial on Jan. 25.

The national memorial was dedicated in October 2011 by President Barack Obama in Washington, D.C.

The replica will be presented next week at a ceremony during the MU Celebrates Martin Luther King, Jr. 2012 event. The event will take place from 7 to 8:30 p.m. at the Missouri Theatre Center for the Arts. A reception will precede the event from 6 to 7 p.m.

Ty Christian, a 1977 graduate of MU, will present the smaller replica of the memorial at the ceremony. Christian worked as chief marketing strategist on the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation.

Under his leadership, the foundation raised \$115 million, according to a news release from the MU News Bureau.

Larry Wilmore, a correspondent on "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart," will be the keynote speaker.

Wilmore has received many awards, including an NAACP Image Award and an Emmy.

The ceremony will include the presentation of the University of Missouri Martin Luther King, Jr. Award to an individual or organization in Boone County. This award recognizes extraordinary leadership and encouragement in furthering cultural diversity in the community.

This event is free and open to the public.



City considers entering deal for wind power

By Andrew Denney

Tuesday, January 17, 2012

The Columbia Water and Light Department has drawn up a contract with a Florida-based renewable energy provider to purchase wind energy from Iowa, and the deal will be presented to the Columbia City Council for a first reading tonight at its regular meeting.

If the contract is approved, the city would enter into a 20-year deal with NextEra Energy Resources LLC to split with the University of Missouri 21 megawatts of wind power from the Crystal Lake III Wind Energy Center in Hancock County, Iowa. The Water and Light Advisory Board unanimously agreed at its November meeting to forward the contract to the council. The council could give final approval to the deal at its Feb. 6 meeting.

Connie Kacprowicz, a Water and Light spokeswoman, said a benefit of using wind energy is that it can be generated in periods of inclement weather.

"This combined with the solar gives us a nice mix of resources," Kacprowicz said. Omaha, Neb.-based Free Power Co. is in the process of installing enough solar panels in the city to annually generate 12,000 megawatt hours of electricity by October.

The city currently draws wind energy from Bluegrass Ridge Wind Farm in northwest Missouri, and last year that energy cost \$65.95 per megawatt hour, Kacprowicz said in an email. The new wind energy source would provide power at \$42.50 per megawatt hour. The city pays about \$55 per megawatt hour for traditional fossil fuel energy off the grid.

The city is mandated to draw 5 percent of its energy from renewable sources by the end of the year and 10 percent by 2018. In 2011, 5.4 percent of the city's energy portfolio was made up of renewable sources, and a city news release said the new wind energy deal could boost the city's renewable energy portfolio by 2.6 percent.

Karlan Seville, a spokeswoman for MU Campus Facilities, said in an email that 13 percent of the university's electricity would come from renewable sources when the deal with NextEra is complete. The university will become part of the wind energy deal through a contract with the city. If the city rejects the contract, the university would make alternative arrangements.

Steve Stengel, a spokesman for NextEra, said the company has power generation assets in 22 states and Canada and has a diverse energy portfolio that includes wind, solar, hydroelectric, nuclear and fossil fuel sources. But, he said, the company is one of the largest generators of wind and solar energy in North America. "In our view, renewable energy plays an important role in helping the country meet its energy needs," Stengel said.

Stengel said the company's clientele includes municipalities such as Springfield, Ill., and Pella, Iowa. In September 2011, NextEra was among a group of investors that received a \$1.5 billion loan guarantee from the federal government to buy a planned 550-megawatt solar farm in Southern California.

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

Some employers find those with autism especially suited for jobs

By Ashley Johnson For The Sun Last Modified: Jan 18, 2012 02:37AM

MU mention page 2

Finding steady work in this economy isn't easy. The challenge is magnified for individuals with disabilities such as autism, who often have difficulty with social interaction.

Experts and parents are trying to change that by helping employers understand what this population has to offer.

"There's an untapped pool of potential workers available in the special needs community that can really do a great job for many employers," said Naperville resident Karen Thomas, whose 19-year-old son, Eric, is autistic.

A graduate of Waubonsie Valley High School, Eric works part time as a janitor at Brookdale Music in Naperville and a greeter at Still Middle School in Aurora. Thomas credits the vocational coordinator at Waubonsie for helping her son find those jobs.

Reaching out

Some employers also are reaching out to individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Turning Pointe Autism Foundation recently launched a career development program that involves partnering with Fortune 500 companies, such as Walgreens, to develop career opportunities for people with communication disorders.

Chris Simler, director of career development services at Turning Pointe, said the program includes courses that address career and life skills. Individuals will be able to learn in a mock environment before transitioning into an actual workplace.

The goal is to "create new opportunities for people with disabilities and give them a career in the community," Simler said.

He stressed there is no typical job for a person with autism. He knows of people working in jobs as varied as retail, data entry, accounting and social work.

"I don't see the walls," Simler said. "The more we can put people with autism in different places the more awareness we can create."

One place is Aspiritech, a nonprofit in Highland Park that hires high-functioning individuals on the autism spectrum to test software. The organization's name combines the words Asperger's, spirit and technology.

Moshe Weitzberg, director of operations, said Aspiritech has 14 employees, including his 32-year-old son, who has Asperger's syndrome. His workers have the ability to focus and spot irregularities that other people would miss. They also deal with challenges related to their autism — some do not like noise or bright lights and many have anxiety issues. Aspiritech has an autism specialist who provides support that extends beyond the workplace.

“This is something that not every company is willing to do,” Weitzberg said.

Productive workers

Professor Scott Standifer of the University of Missouri's Disability Policy and Studies office said the key to employment is matching a person's skills and features with job requirements. Employers also need to build in supports and make sure co-workers understand the person's communication style.

Businesses that hire people with autism “can have not only loyal employees, but loyal customers that come attached to them as family members, advocates and friends,” Standifer added.

Thomas agreed. She recalled attending an event to recognize employers who have hired people with disabilities. Several managers said they had hired disabled students to do a nice thing but found out they made great employees.

“It has become a real win-win for them and the students,” she said. “That's what we're trying to educate the small business owners and the hiring managers in the community on — that we're not asking for charity, we know that our students can be productive workers.”

In both his jobs, Eric started out with a job coach but now works independently, which Thomas called “fantastic.”

Laurie and Jim Jerue of Naperville recognized that their daughter loved to stay busy but would face significant barriers to traditional employment because of her severe autism. They developed a home-based business called Helper Girl through which Sarah, 23, performs tasks, including document shredding and container planting.

“It's all geared to Sarah's strengths and her interests as well as my own,” Laurie Jerue said, “so we kind of melded the two into this little business.”



University of Missouri cancer researcher working to license laser-induced ultrasound tool

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

First Posted: January 17, 2012 - 5:01 am

COLUMBIA, Mo. — A University of Missouri researcher has developed a new cancer-detecting tool that he hopes will allow for earlier identification of melanoma before tumors can form.

John Viator is an associate professor of biomedical engineering and dermatology in the school's Bond Life Sciences Center. His new device relies on photoacoustics, or laser-induced ultrasound, to identify melanoma cancer at the cellular level using small blood samples.

Viator is working with a private company to spin off his university work and license the technology for academic research. He's also seeking regulatory approval from the federal Food and Drug Administration to begin clinical trials.



Sen. McCaskill ends energy tour in Columbia

By Rudi Keller

Tuesday, January 17, 2012

MU MENTION P. 2

U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill brought public utility officials and energy researchers together yesterday at Columbia's power plant as she sought to portray the future of power generation as a mix of old and new technology.

The municipal power plant burns a mix of wood and coal to provide electricity for Columbia. The city also has made significant investments in renewable power supplies, with a generator burning gas from the landfill and a 12-megawatt solar array under construction.

The stop was the last on McCaskill's multiday tour of the state on energy and pollution issues. The Missouri Democrat has used the tour to portray her stand as a middle ground between those who want to destroy pollution protections and those who would impose large new costs on coal-generated power.

"We are fortunate our energy costs are lower than in many states, and I'd like to keep it that way," McCaskill said.

Missouri Republicans, however, want to portray McCaskill, who is up for re-election this year, as indifferent to the costs of implementing new pollution controls. She wrongly supported a failed 2008 "cap-and-trade" bill for controlling carbon dioxide pollution, the GOP has said in news releases issued during McCaskill's tour. And, Republicans said, McCaskill voted against a bill that would have blocked the Environmental Protection Agency from imposing new controls on emissions.

"At a time when the economy is suffering, families are struggling to make ends meet and more than 250,000 Missourians are out of work, now is not the time for the federal government to be enacting onerous new regulations that will hurt every Missourian who turns on a light bulb," said Jonathon Prouty, spokesman for the party.

But McCaskill said the bill did more than block EPA authority over power plant emissions. The measure would have destroyed the EPA, she said. "I'm not going to vote to do away with the EPA," she said.

During yesterday's discussion, researchers told McCaskill major breakthroughs are on the way.

Galen Suppes, a professor of chemical engineering at the University of Missouri, told McCaskill that technology he is working on would, within 10 years, cut the cost of battery technology for electric cars in half and provide batteries that recharge fully within 10 minutes.

Sheila Baker, an assistant professor of chemical engineering, said she is working on processes to remove carbon dioxide from power plant emissions at a fraction of the current cost.

Those projects and others offering promise of homegrown solutions are the kind that need federal research aid, McCaskill said.

"Those who think we ought to shut down federal research projects are being terribly shortsighted," she said.

But none of those technologies is available now, and the utility officials on hand said they need certainty in regulation. The EPA rules are intended to target power plant emissions of carbon dioxide and mercury.

At the same time, other federal regulators are pushing electric suppliers to provide more reliable service, said Tad Johnsen, director of the Columbia Water and Light Department.

"I don't want to pick the lesser of two evils and identify who we are going to get in trouble with," Johnsen said.

The main thing utility companies need is time to implement the new rules. That would help avoid major cost increases for customers, the utility officials said.

McCaskill said she is working on a two-year moratorium on the new regulations.

"Washington does this too often," she said. "It is not a one-size-fits-all problem."