

The **Association** report

from the **Capitol**

June 8, 2004

The Missouri legislative session that ended recently had its moments of frustration, similar to others recently, however it wound up with good news and encouraging indications of better things to come for our Association members.

In the short term, a \$1,200 across-the-board pay raise is the good news. It's not what our people, who have gone without raises for several years, really deserve. But it is something in the paycheck to offset rising health insurance costs and other essentials. Possibly of more significance, however, is that the mood and atmosphere has started to brighten at the capitol.

For several years running, our Association members enjoyed quite a number of successes in the legislative arena in the form of expanded benefits, better pay and favorable retirement options. The slowing economy and state budget problems put the skids to our consistent successes. Revenue shortages and budget balancing dilemmas caused legislative leaders to cautiously screen legislative proposals that might cost money. Committee chairs became skeptical of any new ideas where the fiscal impact was in doubt. (This included bills where the cost would, in the most extreme situation, be minimal, perhaps a few thousand dollars.)

Events near the end of the legislative session would indicate that we've turned the corner and are headed for more reasonable times for state workers. The pay raise was the first indication. That was supported by budget experts who had predicted an increased revenue flow. They were proven correct when tax dollars were collected and counted late in the spring. The gloom has started to brighten over at the capitol. We've had success in the past and there's reason to believe that the times are such that we can pick up where we left off.

And while there was little legislation passed this session, especially that which would benefit state employees, our work continued in the capitol. A number of bills were proposed, opposed, filed, redrafted and amended on behalf of our Association. Steve Cox, Association President, and legislative specialist Larry Thompson, appeared regularly at committee hearings to explain the potential impact that a specific bill would have on our workers.

Several legislators emerged as advocates of state employees. Sen. Harry Kennedy sponsored SB1216 to allow MoDOT employees the opportunity to buy prior public service credit at a reduced rate. Sen. Delbert Scott and Rep. Gary Kelly introduced bills which would offer a better conversion of unused sick leave to retirement credit. Those bills were SB1384 and HB1316. All of these bills were well received by many legislators but eventually fell victim to the pervasive mood of lingering financial doubt. Sen. Kennedy was particularly aggressive in attempting to locate a place to amend the language from SB1216.

Rep. Tom Green of St. Charles sponsored HB1282 which would require MoDOT to prepare a cost-benefit analysis for the proposed privatization of any department contract with a value of \$200,000 or more. Our position in this area soon turned to defense, however, when Sen. Dan Clemens filed SB1232. Called "The Competitive Government Act," SB1232 would encourage state departments to explore the potential for increased privatization of jobs. Mike Michelson deserves credit here for working closely with Sen. Clemens' staff to make certain that the Association's concerns with the proposal were understood. A committee substitute for SB1232 was debated on the senate floor but was "laid over" and died on the "Senate Bills for Perfection - Informal Calendar" (A modest Mike Michelson probably would be reluctant to accept the credit he deserves for his effective work on this bill.)

Other legislative proposals filed at our request included HB1499, HB1488, HB1373, HB1130 and HB1273. The latter, HB1273, would allow employees who have accrued annual leave hours in excess of the maximum balance to apply those hours to the shared leave program, to purchase additional retirement credits or for deposit of a cash equivalent into the employee's deferred compensation plan. This bill was sponsored by Rep. D.J. Davis and Rep. Jerry King, neither of whom will return to the legislature next year.

HB1130 and HB1373 are intended to allow unused sick leave and unused annual leave (vacation time) to be used to meet "80 and Out" retirement requirements. HB1373 is a refined and corrected version of HB1130. Both of these bills were sponsored by Rep. Esther Haywood who has been a loyal friend of MoDOT employees. Rep. Haywood intends to return to the general assembly next year however she has opposition in the August primary.

HB1488 would require a comprehensive job study every five years by MoDOT as well as requiring no more than three pay brackets per pay grade for salaried employees. HB1488 was sponsored by Rep. Wes Wagner and Rep. Dan Ward. Rep. Wagner has opposition in his re-election bid to the house and Rep. Ward is running for an open senate seat.

Rep. Bill Ransdall sponsored HB1499 which could have given MoDOT employees who retire early extended health insurance coverage. This bill carried provisions similar to legislation passed in the '03 legislative session giving other state employees an opportunity to retire early with up to five years additional health insurance coverage. The MoDOT commission would have to first approve the early-retirement incentive. The bill had little chance after opposition by the department. The bill's sponsor, Rep. Ransdall, is the house assistant minority floor leader.

MoDOT worker safety also was addressed in an amendment by Sen. Victor Callahan who is from the Kansas City area. The amendment would have required additional fines of up to \$300 for "a second or subsequent" conviction of speeding in a construction or work zone. The amendment was proposed for SB1233 but failed to be attached.. Discussions of the idea, however, indicated that the increased fines for repeat, work-zone violations has some broad support. Observers said the only detraction from the amendment is that there is inadequate funds to properly patrol and enforce existing work-zone laws.

Our Association got some good exposure this spring over at the capitol with a "Legislative Ice Cream Social" held April 19 in the 3rd floor rotunda. In a variation from our annual "Association Lobby Day at the Capitol," we decided to take the party to legislators' home turf. The response, I believe, was positive and should be considered again. The reason for its success? It is sometimes difficult to get certain legislators to stray from their normal capitol routine and attend outside social functions. However, if a legislator can stroll out the back door of his or her house or senate chamber - for ice cream and conversation - it fits comfortably in the day of a busy legislator.

From the reports I got of the Association Ice Cream Social, our members passing out the treats were courteous and informative. Job well done.

**From Harry Hill, Lobbyist
Missouri Highway and Transportation Employees' Association**