

House Minority Caucus



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House Democrats enjoy success during first half of session

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. – House Democrats scored some successes during the first half of the 2008 legislative session despite the overall lack of action in the Republican-controlled chamber.

The first bill the House passed this year was the bipartisan HB 1661 sponsored by House Minority Leader Paul LeVota, D-Independence, and co-sponsored by House Speaker Rod Jetton, R-Marble Hill, to resolve a tax dispute with Kansas and avoid retaliation by the Kansas Legislature state against Missouri residents who work in that state.

Also, the House Budget Committee adopted a plan long pushed by Democrats to improve salaries for lower-paid state workers. Under the plan, all state employees will receive raises of \$1,056. The governor had proposed 3-percent salary increases, which mainly would have benefitted higher-paid employees. Under the governor's plan an employee making \$100,000 a year would have gotten a \$3,000 raise while a front-line state worker making \$20,000 annually would have received only a \$600 raise.

“Missouri doesn't rank near-last in the nation in state employee salaries because high-level administrators are poorly paid; it has that embarrassing ranking because rank-and-file workers aren't adequately compensated,” said Assistant House Minority Leader J.C. Kuessner, D-Eminence. “The House pay plan will provide better salaries to the employees who most need them.”

Another annual priority for House Democrats that is making progress is legislation to remove political patronage from the license fee office system. For the first time, the bill -- HB 1866 sponsored by state Rep. Luke Scavuzzo, D-Harrisonville -- is scheduled to receive a committee hearing. With Missouri guaranteed of having a new governor next year, which will result in the 183 fee office contracts being redistributed, Scavuzzo said now is the perfect time to institute a non-patronage system.

Overall, however, the first half of the session has been marked by an atypical lack of activity. The chamber has spent at most 90 minutes each morning debating legislation and isn't scheduled to hold afternoon sessions until it returns from its spring recess on March 25, which is unheard of.

“With a lame-duck governor, a lame-duck House speaker and a Senate leader recuperating from a serious illness, Missouri government is rudderless,” LeVota said. “Instead of addressing important issues such as extending health care to the more than 750,000 uninsured Missourians, the House seems to be going through the motions of doing the people's business.”

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One issue Republicans have made a priority is repealing the state's campaign contribution limits, which Missouri voters first imposed in 1994 with 73.9 percent support. The Senate passed the bill last month, and the House is expected to take it up in the session's second half. When the legislature first attempted to repeal the limits in 2006, an effort the Missouri Supreme Court overturned on procedural grounds, nearly every House Democrat voted against the bill.

"House Democrats will continue to oppose this misguided effort to overturn the will of voters and open the floodgates of money into Missouri election campaigns," said House Minority Whip Connie Johnson, D-St. Louis.

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