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Tila Hubrecht's Capitol Report - January 1, 2016

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A Farewell to 2015

In what seems like the blink of an eye, 2015 came and went and along the way carried with it both dramatic highs and devastating lows. The year started with a legislative session with an ambitious agenda that the General Assembly worked hard to complete. Major successes included medical malpractice reforms to keep the costs of health care in check; reforms to the state's system of welfare to give Missourians in need an incentive to get back to work; and a fix to the state's unemployment system meant to ensure benefits are available to the jobless while also protecting business owners from excessive taxes and fees. The legislature also came together to pass landmark municipal court reform legislation meant to crack down on the predatory practices some municipalities have used to raise revenue through excessive traffic tickets.

Sadly, the accomplishments of the General Assembly were overshadowed by several tragic events that sent shockwaves not just through the Capitol, but through the state and nation as well. It was in late February when legislators were devastated by the news that State Auditor Tom Schweich had taken his own life. Members immediately gathered for a prayer service in the House Chamber as they tried to cope and support one another during such an emotionally trying time. The anguish was amplified just a few weeks later when one of Schweich's key staffers made the decision to take his own life as well. Again, members were reminded that all life is precious but fragile, and that the political pressure cooker can sometimes drive individuals to make decisions with tragic consequences.

Outside the state of Missouri, the year produced several difficult moments that left Americans and many around the globe in tears. Terrorist attacks in Paris – both at the beginning of the year and again in November – resulted in an enormous loss of life, and reminded the world that the forces of terror remain a significant threat. Within the borders of the United States, mass shootings in Charleston, South Carolina; Roseburg, Oregon; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Colorado Springs,

Colorado; and San Bernardino, California shook the nation to its core as far too many innocent lives were taken. Missouri and the rest of the nation also dealt with the fallout from global events as the White House initiated a plan to allow 10,000 Syrian refugees into the country. Missouri and many other states continue to fight efforts to relocate refugees within their borders until the federal government can ensure none of the immigrants pose a security risk.

The year 2015 also produced unexpected changes in leadership in both the Missouri House and Senate. On the House side, Floor Leader Todd Richardson took over as House Speaker after the former Speaker resigned due to an inappropriate relationship with an intern. On the Senate side, Floor Leader Ron Richard ascended to the top position after President Pro Tem Tom Dempsey vacated his seat to seek employment outside the building. As 2016 is set to begin, members from both chambers have rallied to support their new leaders and are set to work together to advance an aggressive legislative agenda that will move Missouri toward a brighter tomorrow.

2015 Comes to a Close with Dangerous Flooding

Rather than a white Christmas, Missourians saw the holiday season produce record levels of rainfall that led to flooding throughout the state. Already the overflowing rivers and streams have taken the lives of 13 Missourians and have led to hundreds more being evacuated. The heavy rains and flooding led Governor Nixon to declare a state of emergency, and to activate the National Guard to support Missouri communities and assist first responders.

Fortunately, the forecast now calls for no heavy rain in the next several days, which should allow the flood waters to recede. However, officials continue to warn all Missourians to continue to use extreme caution when encountering water-covered roads.

The governor urged residents of flood-affected areas of Missouri to pay close attention to weather warnings and follow the safety instructions of local officials as the potential for additional dangerous flooding continues. Missourians, especially motorists, are encouraged to remember these important safety tips on flooding and high water:

Do not walk through moving water. Six inches of moving water can make you fall. If you have to walk in water, walk where the water is not moving. Use a stick to check the firmness of the ground in front of you.

Do not drive into flooded areas. If floodwaters rise around your car, abandon the car and move to higher ground if you can do so safely. You and the vehicle can be quickly swept away. Six inches of water will reach the bottom of most passenger cars, causing loss of control and possible stalling.

A foot of water will float many vehicles. Two feet of rushing water can carry away most vehicles, including sport utility vehicles and pick-ups. Even if the water appears shallow enough to cross, don't try it. Water hides dips in the road. Worse yet, there may be no road at all under the water. Flooding can scour away the entire road surface and a significant amount of ground beneath.

Missourians who need disaster information, shelter information, and referrals are urged to call 211. The 211 service is now available throughout Missouri.

Congressman Jason Smith had arranged a community town hall meeting with the Corps of Engineers on the afternoon of the 31st. State Senator Doug Libla, State Representatives Holly Rehder and Don Rone as well as myself attended this meeting. In attendance there were also many other local community leaders present. The Corp, per their statements at this meeting, do not feel they will be activating the floodway at the current flood stages and predictions. I will continue to monitor this situation closely, if you have any issues with the flooding, please do not hesitate to contact my office, if we cannot provide the assistance we will find who can!

Legislature Set to Look at Real ID Issue

The State of Missouri recently was notified by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that driver's licenses issued in Missouri will not be considered valid forms of identification by federal facilities. The notification has set leaders in both the House and Senate into motion to develop a compromise or fix that will ensure Missourians do not have issues in the future with boarding an airplane. For now, the federal government's decision to not recognize Missouri driver's licenses will only prevent license holders from using that ID to enter a federal facility such as a military base. However, both House Speaker Richardson and Senate President Pro Tem Ron Richard have said they want to act quickly to develop a solution that will protect Missourians from any inconvenience or loss of access or services.

It was in 2009 that Missouri passed legislation to prevent changes proposed by the federal Real ID Program. Specifically, the bill prohibits the state revenue department from changing the procedures for applying for a driver's license to comply with the federal act. Real ID was approved by Congress in 2005 in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The goal was to create minimum standards for government-issued identification. However, several states joined Missouri in rejecting what they saw as an attempt to create a national identification card.

Now, lawmakers will look for a compromise solution that will honor the spirit of the 2009 law, but also ensure Missourians don't have to face additional hurdles when traveling.

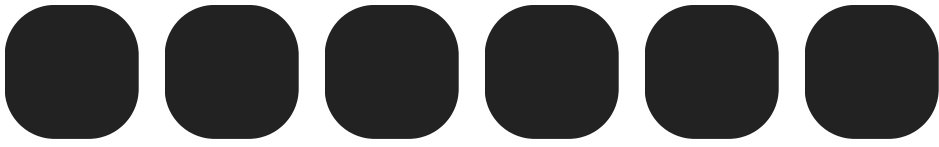
Until Next Week,

Tila

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