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# 2016 Legislative Session Begins with Call to Action

JANUARY 11TH 2016 BY DEE LOFLIN

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## **2016 Legislative Session Begins with Call to Action from House Speaker Richardson**

The opening day of the 2016 legislative session was marked by a speech from House Speaker Todd Richardson in which he called upon members to work together to, “find answers to the seminal challenges of our time and make tough decisions.” Richardson reminded members that the Missouri House of Representatives, “cannot be a place where inaction, infighting and indifference define us. This must be a place where we tackle and solve real problems.”

In his speech, Richardson highlighted many of the recent accomplishments of the legislature. He emphasized the General Assembly’s work to end the practice of taxation by citation in the municipal court system; passage of the first income tax cut in a century; reforms to the state’s welfare system to help get people out of poverty rather than trap them in it; and efforts to reduce the numbers of abortions in the state by 30 percent over the last 10 years.

Richardson also cited several accomplishments that have not received as much attention including efforts to make oral chemotherapy medications more affordable for Missourians battling cancer; work to ensure Missourians with eating disorders have access to the help and care they need; and proactive steps taken by the legislature to protect children from the ever-growing dangers of human trafficking. As Richardson said in his speech, “By doing so, we’ve made our state a better, more compassionate place.”

In setting the tone for the upcoming session, Richardson reminded his colleagues that while much had been accomplished, the legislature still has much to do. Richardson noted that, “We live in a state where wages are stagnant. Consider this; the spending power of a Missouri family is \$5000 – less than it was at the start of this century. We live in a state where a devastating cycle of dependency traps too many of our fellow Missourians in poverty. More people are on

government assistance than ever before. Spending on welfare and entitlement programs is growing at a rate faster than our economy.”

Richardson called on his colleagues to work together to help find solutions to the problems facing Missouri families, and to develop ideas that will allow Missourians to pursue the American Dream rather than be trapped in poverty. Richardson ended his speech by asking members if they will use their, “time and the unique power we all hold to make this state a better place and to be an advocate for those who sent us here? The answer to that question is the one that will define us.”

### **Opening Day of Session Highlighted by Emphasis on Ethics Reform**

During his Opening Day Address, House Speaker Richardson also made it clear that the top legislative priority for the House in the first days of session will be substantive ethics reform. Richardson said he plans to immediately assign every ethics bill filed in the House to committee so that members can begin a thorough discussion on the proposals designed to improve the culture at the Missouri State Capitol.

Richardson said he is asking the committee to, “act with haste to send us a set of substantive, meaningful, single subject ethics bills so that they may be the very first matter that this General Assembly tackles. In doing so we will improve the environment in Jefferson City, and begin the process of restoring the public’s confidence in this institution. There is no rule or law that can make our imperfect process perfect, but we can, and we must, work to improve the culture here in the people’s Capitol.”

Richardson has already stated he supports implementing a ban on all gifts from lobbyists to legislators and an end to the revolving door that allows elected officials to immediately become lobbyists after leaving office. Legislators also will discuss improvements to the personal financial disclosure requirements, and prohibiting members from also serving as paid political consultants. Richardson said he expects several bills to make it to the floor next week and for the House to approve and send the bills on to the Senate.

### **Lawmakers to Consider Transportation Funding Issue**

Another pressing issue lawmakers will try to tackle in 2016 deals with the finding a much-needed funding solution for Missouri’s transportation system. While increasing revenues have made the situation less dire than it was a year ago, the state’s transportation department still needs an additional \$160 million in new revenues to adequately maintain and improve the existing highway system. During the opening day of the legislative session, lawmakers had differing views on how to address the funding shortfall.

Some lawmakers support a small fuel tax increase – 1.5 cents for gasoline and 3.5 cents for diesel fuel – to generate additional dollars for the state’s roads. They noted that at with the current low gas prices, a minimal fuel tax increase would have minimal impact on the pocket books of Missourians. The Senate gave first-round approval to legislation to raise the tax last year, but the bill never made it to the other side of the building. This year, versions of the bill have been filed in both

the House and Senate.

However, many in the legislature are opposed to any sort of tax increase. They note that voters rejected a proposed increase in 2014 that would have increased the state sales tax by  $\frac{3}{4}$  cent to raise an additional \$540 million. House Speaker Todd Richardson pointed out that the proposed small fuel tax increase would generate only a portion of the new funding needed by the transportation department. The proposed increase would generate only \$56 million of the \$160 million needed for Missouri's roads. Richardson also said, "We're going to be focused in the House on finding some ways to improve the transportation system and the amount of money we're spending on transportation through the budget – and trying to find some ways that we can prioritize that spending as we have revenue growth."

In the coming weeks, lawmakers will spend time discussing the possible solutions for Missouri's road funding crisis.

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151st State Representative

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