Testimony Before the Missouri House of Representatives
EDUCATION COMMITTEE
February 22, 2005

Mr. Chairman, members of the Education Committee:
My name is James Sterling and I wish to speak in opposition to the House Bill to change the name of Southwest Missouri State University to Missouri State University.

I am a professor at the University of Missouri these days, but I do not represent the University in any official manner. I am a Republican and I served six years on the Missouri Board of Curators as an appointment of Governor John Ashcroft. My home at that time was near Bolivar and I owned newspapers in three counties north of Springfield.

The issue before us today is one of extreme importance to all Missourians. It does not deserve the rough treatment it has received in a system of political spoils and backroom maneuvering.

The issue appears simple enough. SMS wants a name change to Missouri State University and its supporters say the school deserves it.

I wish it were that simple. But in the fragile environment in this state perpetually cursed with low spending for higher education, this legislative body is being forced to create an entire new system of higher education and that will fracture the entire system in the process.

Adding a new system may be good news to Springfield, but it isn’t good news for Joplin or Warrensburg or Cape Girardeau. It isn’t good news for Poplar Bluff, St. Louis or St. Joseph where their state universities and colleges are being pushed down a level. If SMS deserves to go up, then the logic of this body must be it’s okay for the others to go down. Simple arithmetic says that if you are number two and someone else becomes number two all by itself, you must now be number three.

So if the promotion of SMS means it’s degrees will be better, although it’s not going to do anything to make them better except change the name, then logic says the other schools, that you say do not deserve to be promoted, are reduced and their degrees will now be of lesser value, and their students – good Missourians that they are, are somehow going to be inferior. Do you really want to do that?

So it is more than a simple name change. It is an issue so important to our new governor that members of his staff are dead set on plunging our state into educational limbo, pulling down the flagship University of Missouri, which is and should be the economic and research engine for the entire state while doing SMS a dubious favor by awarding it a higher role with no money to pay for it.

The option, of course, if you really want to do this, is to do the right thing and ask the citizens of the state to pony up enough money in new taxes to fund this massive project that many of you seem so anxious to vote for. But I don’t think you want to do that, and if you did, the citizens of the state would likely vote it down. And vote you down, too, for suggesting it. But you should consider that before you create an entire new statewide system with no money to pay for it. You haven’t been doing a very good job of paying for things as they are. Our state is 46th in per capita aid to higher education.

I remember Gene Taylor, a good friend who was our seventh district congressman, telling about an oldtimer from down in the Ozarks near my home for 50 years.

The old fellow told Gene he was doing a good job up there in Washington, DC, but there were three things he wanted Gene to always ask himself before voting on any new bill.

As a longtime Ozarker myself, I think there is a measure of common sense and native intelligence in this story. It applies here and it is worth remembering.

Question No. 1. Do we need it? Satisfy yourself that this is something important and necessary. Debate the issues. Don’t let the governor’s office shut down the conversation. I think
this is an issue that deserves lots of discussion. But the executive branch doesn’t seem to agree with that. Otherwise why threaten and coerce and indeed promise punishment to Republicans who do not support this issue. I’m a Republican and I don’t like that, and I can tell you there are lots of Republican across this state who don’t like it either. Or they won’t once they find out what the bill is really all about.

A good friend of mine who is a former Curator for the University of Missouri and a loyal and generous worker in Republican campaigns over the past 30 years is absolutely irate. He ran campaigns for John Ashcroft and raised money for Matt Blunt. He has a Matt Blunt bumper sticker on his car. His wife is a member of the National Committee and helped get George Bush and Matt Blunt elected. But the Governor, who indicates he’ll have a long memory for those who oppose him on this issue, has a short memory for those who elected him.

But I’m getting away from the story of the old Ozarker. Do we need it? Well some people in Springfield think so. Others across the state disagree. Most people, really, depend on you to make good, wise decisions for them. They don’t expect you to make decisions based on threats or being told this issue is important to the Republican base in Missouri.

No. 2 - Can we afford it? Do we need it and can we afford it?

The answer here is a clear “No”. The University of Missouri has lost $158 million from it’s budget over the past three years and the best that can be promised this year is a level budget. But in a time when the Governor has said he would maintain the state budget and not withhold state funding for any reason, his people told the President of the University of Missouri that they would cut $50 million to $100 million from the University budget if he didn’t agree to support the name change.

That came about in the middle of the night at the St. Valentine’s Day massacre when he was rousted from bed and told this is how it is going to be. Get on board or risk millions.

One hundred ten thousand Mizzou graduates in this state must be pleased to hear that higher education is being discussed by such reasoned rhetoric.

The truth is this state cannot afford a new level of higher education in Missouri. You know that. Or you should.

And finally No. 3. After asking yourself if we need it and can we pay for, and only after finding affirmative answers for both – which I’m suggesting is not the case, then ask yourselves how in hell have we gotten along without it for so long?

Why not take your time to study the role and scope of this issue as it concerns all of higher education in this state? That is your responsibility. If you vote for this it will mean new costs – huge new costs – to do it right.

So why would you let the governor’s office come over in the middle of the night and tell you what you are going to do? Once upon a time, way back in the eighth grade in Bolivar I learned about the checks and balances of our government. Now it seems they are no longer important. What is important is being re-elected and/or getting appointed to good paying government jobs.

Back 37 years ago I started out in the newspaper business in Bolivar and one day a fellow from Dadeville named Ralph Melton walked in my office. He was running for State Representative and Polk County was in his district.

He wanted to run an ad just the way he’d written it. It said, “I won’t be no governor’s rubber stamp.” I thought that was pretty humorous back then when I was young and real smart. But over the years I got to know Ralph Melton and believe he was one of the finest men I’ve ever known. And he lived by his message. He lived by his word. He studied the issues and voted the way he thought was best for his district and the state of Missouri. I didn’t always agree with him, but I admired the way he served in the legislature.

I’m on record for lots of reasons why I think Missouri State University should not be available. From the state constitution to the Columns at Old MSU...Old Mizzou...I can talk all day, but I won’t.
This issue has grown beyond a simple name change. It has become an important issue of public policy about the creation of a new system of higher education in Missouri. It doesn’t deserve the kind of treatment it received in the Senate. It ought to be studied by reasonable and intelligent people – people interested in the future of the state and not just their next political office.

So remember the Old Ozarker and remember who you are – Members of the Missouri House of Representatives. You represent people – people who are depending on you to do the right thing.

This is not an issue about Republicans and Democrats. It is about Missouri – our state, our people and your pledge to do what the state motto says, “Let the welfare of the people be the supreme law.”

Thank you.

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