

Moving Missouri Forward

An Interview with
The Honorable Jeremiah (Jay) W. Nixon,
55th Governor of Missouri



The Hon. Jay Nixon

EDITORS' NOTE Elected on November 4, 2008, Jay Nixon is serving his first term as Governor of Missouri. Before becoming Governor, Nixon was elected to a record four terms as Missouri's Attorney General, beginning in 1992. After earning both his undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Missouri-Columbia, Nixon returned to De Soto, Missouri, to practice as an attorney. In 1986, he was elected to his first term in the Missouri State Senate, where he would represent the people of Jefferson County for six years.

What impact did the economic crisis of the past 24 months have on Missouri and how is the state positioned going forward?

To overcome the economic challenges we've faced, my administration has focused on two key priorities. First, we've made sure the state's fiscal house is in order. We're the only state in the Midwest that has maintained our Triple-A credit rating, which signals that Missouri is a great place to do business. I had to trim almost \$1.5 billion out of the budget and had to trim the state workforce by 2,500 to make sure we remained in that strong position. That rating also allowed us to refinance some of our bonds at historically good rates and save a significant amount of money.

Our second priority is focusing on creating jobs and getting Missourians back to work. I'm a big believer that, while the challenge in our economy right now is that you don't have enough jobs for people who want them, in the long range, the challenge is not having enough trained people for the jobs of the future.

So we've done some unique things to promote education and training in Missouri. We're the only state in the country with a two-year freeze on tuition for all in-state students at all of our public, two-year and four-year colleges and universities.

Even while we had to trim the budget, we are investing in programs that will train workers for the careers of tomorrow. One of those programs, Caring for Missourians, is making about \$40 million available for those studying for health care degrees, which will lead to an uptick of about 1,300 professionals in that area.

We followed that up with an initiative called Training for Tomorrow, which is a community college initiative to expand specific customized training in fields like energy efficiency, computers, and automotive technology.

We also developed a program called Work Ready, where folks collecting unemployment can continue to receive those benefits while receiving on-the-job training.

The second piece is making sure our economic development tools, like tax credits and other incentives, are sharp and effective. I believe that the future of our economy includes making products – putting the P back in GDP – and that Missouri is well positioned for that. We want to make sure we have the right incentive programs to attract those production and manufacturing jobs of the future to our state.

Earlier this year, we kicked off a five-year strategic economic planning process to help us review all of our economic development efforts and make sure we're on the right track.

Because of all these efforts, our unemployment rate has remained below the national average, and we added thousands of new jobs in Missouri in 2010.

So we're working our way back up.

I have also not let partisan politics enter into this. We work with a Republican Senate and a Republican House, and I have worked from day one with every member of the legislature. Relative to other parts of the country, that has been a style shift. It incentivizes everybody in public service to be more civil.

Within Missouri, how strong is the education system today?

There are a lot of good things going on in education, especially in a state like Missouri with such a long and proud tradition of public education.

We need to continue to recruit top-flight teachers; look at all educational options, including public charter schools; look at drop-out prevention programs; and look at reform in the senior year of high school. We'd like to create an environment in which outstanding students will be able to get at least a half year of college credit during their senior year in high school so they're not only saving money on college but are also being challenged. We want the other kids to get into technical or vocational programs so they're transitioning to work instead of cruising to the end of senior year.

We will continue to work for educational reforms that will deliver for kids and parents. But we're going to remain very positive and optimistic about public education, because building the next generation of teachers, that human capital asset, is extremely important.

Where will the jobs come from, and is it possible to have a recovery without job creation?

I firmly believe that getting people back to work is the only way to get our economy moving. We're a strong plant and animal science state, so we want to embrace science and technology because many of the jobs of the future will be in those areas.

I'm also optimistic about the future of manufacturing in Missouri, especially in the automotive industry. It's not going to take as many people to build a car in the future as it does now. You're going to have leaner manufacturing, but Missouri has the workforce and the facilities to remain a major player in that area.

We're in the heart of a significant process that has engaged hundreds of local leaders around the state to look at every sector of our economy and pinpoint exactly what fields will create the jobs of tomorrow. We're going to be very focused about the industries we want to grow in our state. My sense is it will have an agricultural and manufacturing tint to it, but all of it will have an overlay of science, technology, and innovation.

In the past few months, we've seen significant investments in Missouri by a number of major technology and scientific companies, including IBM, Unisys, and DuPont/Pioneer. Those companies are creating hundreds of new jobs in our state. Those are solid tech jobs for the future in the heartland, and math, science, engineering, and education are going to be a significant portion of the educational portfolio for the future.

Many talk about the optimism of being able to create change in assuming office, but how challenging is that when you can't do everything you want to do because of fiscal and political constraints?

It's challenging, but public service is often about incremental change, and if you get the momentum going in the right direction, then you can increase your impact.

There are things you would like to do that you can't get to because there aren't the resources right now to do them. But those challenges pale in comparison to the positive things you can accomplish in doing this job. ●