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Federal law would unleash big trucks

By Nolan Clay
Missourian staff writer

Missouri will have to change its "big truck law" to allow bigger trucks on the interstates or lose federal highway funding under provisions of a transportation bill passed Tuesday by the U.S. House of Representatives

If the bill becomes law, which appears likely, the state could forfeit more than $200 million earmarked for its highways

U S Rep Harold Volkmer, D-Hannibal, said the state legislature will have to re-examine the trucking limits to prevent the loss.

The same transportation bill, now before the Senate, would raise the federal gas tax by 5 cents If approved, Volkmer said, Missouri would not lose the increased federal funding — even though it cannot immediately come up with matching state funds The bill allows the state to wait almost two years to raise the matching funds with no delay in federal funding

Under the provision in the bill affecting Missouri's trucking law, a state must accept federal weight and size limitations for trucks traveling the interstates or lose funds authorized under the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 The bill would allow trucks traveling the interstates a maximum length of 60 feet and a maximum weight of 80,000 pounds, Volkmer said The bill also would permit a maximum truck width of 102 inches

The federal limitations, if approved, will go into effect Jan 1, 1984, when new tax rates affecting truckers begin

Missouri's "big truck law" limits trucks to 55 feet maximum length and 73,280 pounds maximum weight Only two other states — Illinois and Arkansas — have tougher limitations than those proposed in the transportation bill.

In April, state voters turned down a law establishing the weight and length limitations now proposed in the federal transportation bill After the election, the legislature proposed a bill allowing trucks 60 feet long in the state Gov Christopher Bond vetoed that bill in May

The state's trucking industry, which campaigned intensely for the higher limits in the state election, is not entirely happy that the limits are coming from a federal tranportation bill The measure also contains huge increases in current heavy-use taxes A truck weighing 80,000 pounds, for instance, would pay $2,000 annually in heavy-use tax, up from $240 annually now

"We don't think very much of it," a spokesman for the Missouri Bus and Truck Association said Truckers are getting what 47 other states have, he argued, "but they're going to pay an arm and leg for it in federal taxes "

Officials at the state Highway Department declined comment until they saw the bill

Volkmer said he had mixed feelings about the proposed limits, noting Missourians had voted them down "On the other hand, it's hard on the truckers not to be able to come through the state," he said

The gas tax hike that was passed Tuesday is designed to raise revenue for highway, bridge and mass transit repairs The bill in its final form would permit the state to get the increased federal funding even if it cannot come up with matching state funds immediately, Volkmer said However, the state would have to pay back the match by the end of the second year, he noted If the state does not, federal funding would be reduced in the third and fourth year by an amount equal to the required match

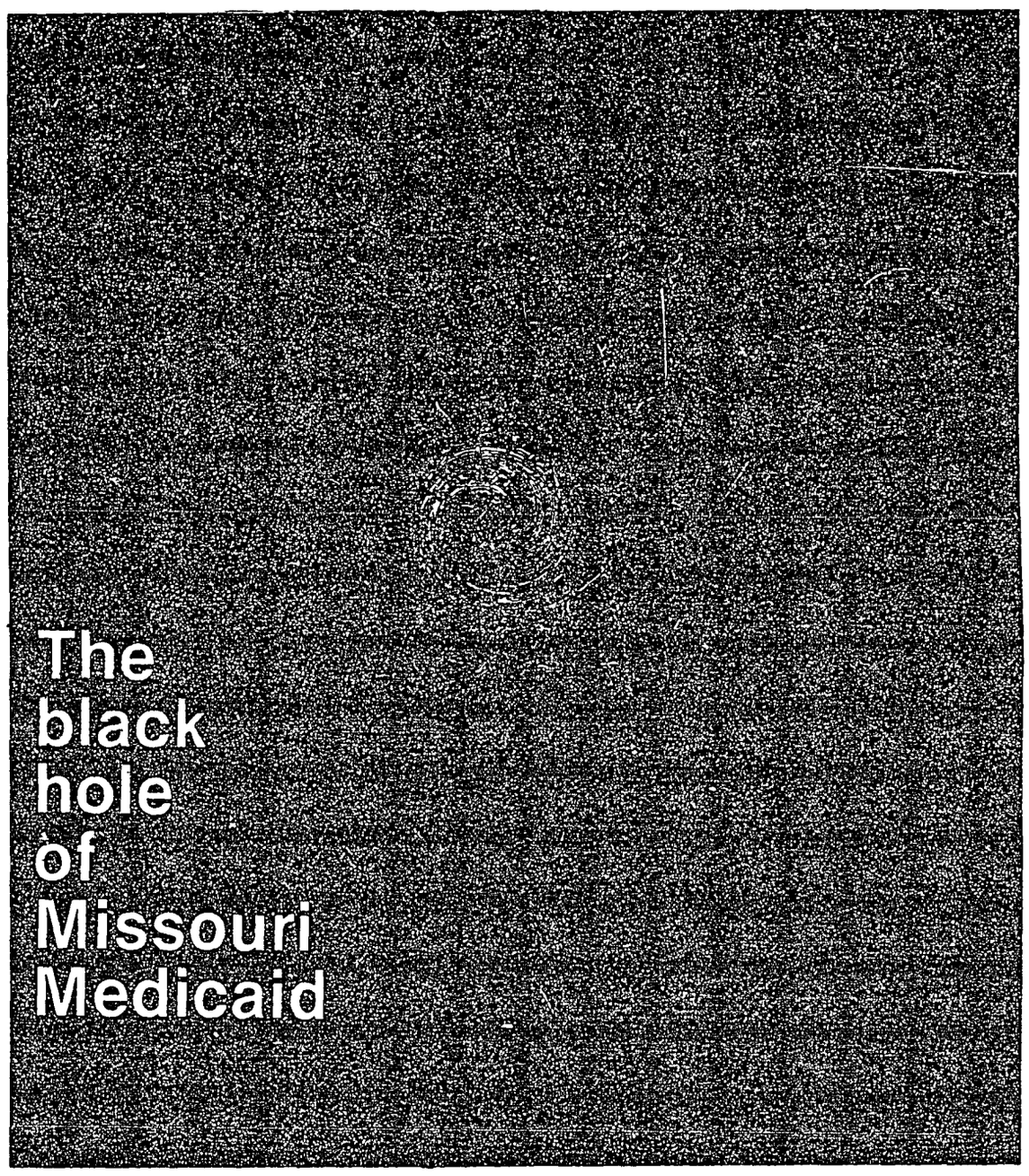
Originally, the bill contained no provision allowing disbursement of the funds without a match The state would get $235 million in federal highway funds during the next fiscal year with the gas tax increase The bill also would create up to 9,000 state jobs, Volkmer said

Volkmer was one of four members of the Missouri delegation to vote for the bill on final passage He said he voted against the tax portion of the bill when it was first adopted becaused proposed excise taxes on trucking would hurt small truckers in the district

Missouri's Medicaid morass

Millions lost every year

By Peggy McCoy and Julie Lobbia
Missourian staff writers



For more than five years, the Missouri state agencies responsible for overseeing the hundreds of millions of dollars spent each year on Medicaid have been out of control By their own estimates, they have dumped at least $20 million and as much as $30 million last year into the black hole of overpayments or outright fraud because of poor state control

And although the state has made concerted efforts in the past year to rein in the program by hiring competent health care specialists and implementing new cost-containment regulations, critics inside and outside state government doubt dramatic changes can be achieved quickly.

Ken Duncan, deputy state auditor, as recently as last month described the system as out of control. Many of the routine management controls the auditor's office has been calling for the state to adopt for more than five years are still missing

Critics who doubt much can be done quickly cite structural changes that have yet to be made and a health care industry in Missouri intent on fighting changes it considers unfair

Medicaid is designed to help the indigent and aged pay for health care. The state and federal government reimburses nursing homes, hospitals, doctors and other health care providers But in Missouri, unlike most other states, there have been precious few safeguards to keep these providers from overcharging the state. Some of them make excessive — sometimes exorbitant — profits at taxpayers' expense.

Missouri's record in controlling these costs does not inspire confidence.

During the past six months, Columbia Missourian reporters have examined hundreds of state records, the records of state and federal hearings and studies and auditors' reports. They also have conducted dozens of interviews with experts inside and outside state government. What emerges is a picture of a state reluctant or unwilling to use cost control methods practiced by many other states, and one that is unable even to recover the money it knows it was overcharged

In fact, while Missouri's Medicaid costs are rising faster than those in any other state, it has ranked near the bottom in catching cheaters and detecting overpayments

The stakes are high. Since the program began in 1966, Missouri has spent more than $2.3 billion in federal and state tax money on Medicaid. More than $313 million was paid to Medicaid providers in fiscal year 1980, $124 million from state tax dollars. The state spent another $413 million for the program in fiscal year 1982.

By comparison, all expenditures for the University's Columbia campus for the same year, excluding the hospital and extension service, were $174 6 million While other consumer prices have risen 75 percent, Medicaid costs are up a whopping 300 percent since 1968.

These are some of the reasons for the cost increases:

- Even when state agencies have tried to hold down costs, their guidelines often miss the mark. As a result, every one of the Department of Social Services' audits for the year ending June 30, 1981, that pinpointed overpayments has been appealed, according to state auditors.

One of these audits of a nursing home revealed depreciation claims for a Lincoln Continental, two vans and a house it says was used to attract and accommodate prospective employees of the nursing home. The department disallowed the costs, but the state's regulations are so weak it has no legal basis for reclaiming this money, according to the state auditor

Of the $4 6 million the department has tried to collect as overpayments, only $124,895 had been returned as of October Some of these bills date back to 1976

State officials now say audits have been appealed less regularly in recent months and that they have received some repayments

- The state's efforts to reclaim overpayments can take years, and the outcome is uncertain According to Larry Kendrick, the department's general counsel, the state is involved in at least 47 lawsuits totaling $5 million in alleged overpayments In some cases, the state claims health care providers knowingly created paper corporations to inflate Medicaid costs To date, it has won only one case, and the efforts can take as long as several

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House refuses funds for MX production; Reagan blasts vote

WASHINGTON (UPI) — The House, in a sharp rebuke to President Reagan, refused on a 245-176 vote Tuesday to approve nearly $1 billion to start production of the MX missile Reagan called the action a "grievous error "

The hard-fought vote came during debate on the $231 6 billion defense appropriation bill The House then set aside the legislation and was expected to finish work on it today and send it to the Senate

Reagan called on the Senate, where Republicans enjoy a 54-46 majority, to reinstate the funds to build the first five of the new intercontinental missiles

The margin in the House against the MX funds was surprisingly wide, and 50 GOP lawmakers deserted Reagan's cause Foes of the nuclear weapon argued it is time to show that Congress is willing to hold down the Pentagon budget

The amendment approved by the House eliminated $988 million for missile production but left intact $2 5 billion for further research and development of the MX, designed to be the hardest-hitting element in the U S arsenal

In a statement read to reporters at the White House, Reagan promised to "do everything I can" to take his case for the MX and its controversial dense pack" basing system to the people

The president said the House made "a tragic mistake" and called on the Senate "to reverse this grievous error "

Failure to approve the MX money, he said, "will seriously set back our effort to protect the nation's security and handcuff our negotiators at the arms table "

During the intense White House lobbying effort that preceded the vote, Reagan said a field of 100 MXs — renamed Peacekeeper — is an "absolute necessity" for his defense buildup and to keep pressure on the Soviets to negotiate a new arms control agreement.

Much of the opposition centered on the dense pack idea, which would have the missiles placed in closely spaced concrete and steel silos in Wyoming that administration officials contend would be safe from Soviet attack

Opposition to the missile — a $26 4 billion component of Reagan's $1 5 trillion military expansion plan — spilled across the aisle of the House as both Democrats and Republicans spoke against it

The dense pack plan depends on a . theory that the Air Force can't even prove on a blackboard," said Rep Ed Markey, D-Mass

"This public works project for the cement industry deserves to be rejected," said Rep Jim Leach R-Iowa

How Missouri congressmen voted

WASHINGTON (UPI) — Missouri congressmen voted along party lines Tuesday on the measure to delete funds for the MX missile from a defense appropriations measure

Democrats Harold Clay, Richard Gephardt Harold Volkmer and Dick Young voted for the measure to cut the funds Democrats Richard Bolling and Ike Skelton did not vote

Republicans Wendell Bailey, Tom Coleman, Bill Emerson and Gene Taylor voted against the cut

GTE wants rate increase of 54% to boost service

By Mark E Russell and Lauren Asplen
Missourian staff writers

General Telephone Co of the Midwest announced Tuesday it will increase Boone County local phone rates by 54 percent if an application for a rate increase is approved by the Missouri Public Service Commission.

The rate increase could give the company $5 3 million more in annual revenues

The increase is nearly the same $5 3 million rate increase the company requested in 1981, when it received only $1 7 million

"At one time, local phone service rates were subsidized by long-distance rates," said Ron Hopwood, GTE public affairs manager "But the Federal Communications Commission is saying the cost-user should be the cost-payer now.

"As a result of the FCC's decision to not subsidize local rates with long-distance rates, GTE must raise local rates to counteract their decision "

In this instance, counteraction could mean the average monthly local phone bill for Boone County residents will rise as much as 54 percent, from $7.35 to $11 32 Average business telephone rates would increase nearly 30 percent, from $16.25 to $21.11. GTE has requested similar rate increases for customers in Centralia, Hallsville and Ashland.

The telephone company also wants to increase equipment charges by 13 1 percent and installation charges by 60 percent.

Hopwood said customer demands for faster, more efficient service were behind the requests for increased local services

"While under state regulation, we expected the equipment to function for 25 years," Hopwood said "Now we see the same equipment, because of changes in technology, becoming obsolete "

In a prepared statement, R E Morgart, GTE state vice president, said, ' Today's new technology is forcing us to replace our equipment a lot sooner than in the past "

At the same time, Hopwood said, the rate of inflation is deflating the dollar and reducing GTE's purchasing power

Labor costs also have burdened GTE "All labor costs went up 9 5 percent in 1981 and 8 9 percent in 1982," Hopwood said "The total of 18 4 percent has been a heavy toll on our company "

The last rate increase request — in 1981 — saw GTE receive 32 percent of its proposal, or more than $1 7 million.

Any rate increase must first be approved by the Missouri Public Service Commission before it can go into effect

But the commission probably will delay the rate increase until after public hearings are held, said Jim Fischer, public counsel. The Office of Public Counsel represents consumers at rate hearings before the commission

The PSC will have up to 11 months to act on the present request by GTE, which provides service to more than 85,000 customers in Missouri Some 46,000 of those customers live in Boone County.

TODAY

12.25 p m. Potters and Painters," lunchtime tour, University Museum of Art and Archaeology

7 p m. An evening of energy information, Assembly Room, Columbia Public Library

7:30 p m. "A Christmas Carol," Warehouse Theater, Stephens College, $4 50

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Man dies at low-water creek crossing

By Gardner Hatch
Missourian staff writer

Richard "Pee Wee" Hudson had lived on Route 6 for two years and had crossed Cedar Creek many times But he misjudged the height of the waters Sunday when he attempted to cross the creek's flooded low-water crossing on St. Charles Rock Road.

Hudson, 63, was found dead Tuesday morning, trapped in his submerged pickup truck.

The truck stalled Sunday afternoon or evening as he attempted to cross the stone culvert spanning the creek, Sheriff Charlie Foster said. He speculated that Hudson was returning home from doing his laundry in Columbia.

"He had a laundry bag in the vehicle," Foster said.

Foster said the pickup floated because the windows were rolled up, and it eventually was swept 75 yards down the swelled stream, which reached a depth of 25 feet last weekend He said Hudson probably misjudged the height of the creek.

"Everyone (in the area) knows that there's a low-water bridge there," Foster said, "and if the water is high, you can't get through "

Foster said Cliff and Albert Sutton, of St. Charles Rock Road (Route 2), saw the roof of the submerged truck in the creek Monday night but thought it was just an abandoned vehicle. They weren't alarmed and decided not to report it. The Suttons were again checking their cattle Tuesday morning and were able to see through the windshield of the truck.

"They thought there were two bodies in the truck," Foster said.

The "second body" turned out to be a bundle of laundry in the front seat.

Foster said he received the report from Cliff Sutton at 9:30 a m. Tuesday and joined Callaway County authorities at the scene to investigate

Hudson lived alone, and Hudson's cousin reported seeing the truck in front of Hudson's house Sunday, Foster said

"Nobody would have been alarmed if his truck wasn't there," Foster said

Ten years ago there was a suspended bridge across Cedar Creek, which forms the border between Boone and Callaway counties But the weight of a cement-mixer truck caused the bridge to collapse, and Boone and Callaway counties agreed to replace it with a stone culvert.

Foster described the crossing as a "concrete slab going across the creek" and said it was passable only when the waters are low.