



Listen Up, Missouri Lawmakers: Here Are Seven Resolutions for 2017

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By: Andrew B. Wilson

Oh, Missouri lawmakers, it is me, the Ghost of a Christmas Yet-to-Come, who whispers in your ear this wintry night. I come not to frighten you (like the baleful ghost in Dickens's tale), nor to load you down with unearned and therefore inconsequential and soon-to-be-forgotten gifts.

Opportunity beckons. This is your chance to do something big. In breaking into your midnight slumbers, I hope only to point the way forward – with a few thoughts on how to accelerate growth and quicken prosperity in Missouri come the New Year.

One is to tell you plainly: Stop trying to pick winners and losers with taxpayer money. Let's say (to use a real example) a group of businessmen tell you that they need \$120 million in public support (\$40 million from the state and another \$80 million from the city) to build a new soccer stadium and bring a Major League Soccer franchise to downtown Saint Louis. While predicting that the project will create jobs and ancillary development, backers are asking for taxpayer money to pay for about two-thirds of the cost of building the stadium.

You must say "No" to all such proposals. If professional investors demand major subsidies for a profit-seeking venture, then you know (or *should* know) it's a bad deal for taxpayers. Governor-elect Eric Greitens has already signaled his opposition to the \$40 million in state tax credits for the proposed stadium. You can go further – much further – by reducing annual spending on state tax credits for targeted economic development from more than \$350 million per year

down to zero. That would free up money for better purposes (see next point).

Two is to leave more after-tax money in the pockets of wage earners and business owners alike. People and businesses vote with their feet. They move out of states where the “tax price” of living, working, or running a business is too high and into states where it is lower. If you include the 1 percent earnings tax in our two biggest cities, Missouri has a top income tax rate of 7 percent, which is more than all but 11 states. You should slash state income taxes 50 percent over the next three years.

Three is to end compulsory unionism as a condition of employment. Six out of eight neighboring states have already passed right-to-work legislation. Missouri should join them in embracing greater freedom and competition in the workplace.

Four is to promote public sector union democracy and transparency. Public sector employees should have the right to say “yea” or “nay” to continued union representation at intervals of every two or three years. At the same time, Missouri should close the loophole that allows public officials and government unions to conduct collective bargaining in closed sessions.

Five is to allow charter schools – now limited to the Kansas City and Saint Louis areas – to expand statewide without limitation. Missouri should adopt innovative programs, such as education savings accounts and tax credit-funded scholarships, enabling public school students trapped in underperforming school districts to attend private schools.

Six is encourage greater competition and choice in another area ripe for reform – health care. You can begin by converting much of Missouri’s Medicaid program into health savings accounts (HSAs). After purchasing catastrophic health care plans, beneficiaries would be free to tailor their spending to their needs and roll over unspent money from one year to the next.

Seven is to eliminate a major disincentive that keeps many poor people from looking for jobs – the loss of public welfare benefits that too often results from finding gainful employment. Earned income tax credits (EITCs) are one practical solution to this problem.

Arise and shine, Missouri legislators. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make exceptional progress across a broad range of important public policy issues.

About the Author



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A former foreign correspondent who spent four years in the Middle East and served as Business Week’s London bureau chief during Margaret Thatcher’s first two terms as Britain’s prime minister, Andrew is a regular contributor to leading national publications, including the American Spectator, the Weekly Standard, and the Wall Street Journal.

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