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Improving the way we choose judges

Missouri Plan has chance to again be a model to the nation

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Conflict can be harmful, even costly. In government, it also can be helpful.

Republican Gov. Matt Blunt started complaining months ago about the way Missouri selects many of its top judges. It's called the Missouri Plan and has been touted as a model since adopted in 1940 to end back-room political deals.

The governor's criticism in general is that the plan has failed to keep up with a society that demands a more open government and technology that makes that governmental transparency practical. We agree with the governor.

The push to reform the plan picked up critical momentum last week during Supreme Court Chief Justice Laura Denvir Stith's annual state of the judiciary address. Now Judge Stith remains a staunch defender of the Missouri Plan. It attracts "high-quality judges in the least political way," according to the chief justice.

But Judge Stith also conceded that there is room for improvement on how the plan is implemented. She announced that the Supreme Court would work to improve its operation in two ways.

First, the court later this month will require commissions to post the time, date and locations of their meetings. The commissions will also provide demographic information about the applicant pool before the meetings and, once three finalists are determined, their applications will go public.

Some lawmakers want more. Rep. Jim Lembke, R-St. Louis, is sponsoring a joint resolution that abolishes the current setup of the Appellate Judicial Commission and creates a larger selection committee with an altered makeup. The proposal increases the panel of nominees submitted to the governor and requires Senate confirmation of the successful nominee.

Compromise is the salve that makes conflict work for government. A more open selection process is key first step in improving the Missouri Plan. Redesigning the selection committee could thwart even that effort unless both sides of this debate can work together on a new approach that works for Missouri.