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News Story

Bar commits \$500,000 to fight for plan

Harris encourages judges, lawyers to get involved

By John DeMoor

After what appeared to be a slow start to counter attacks against the Nonpartisan Court Plan, The Missouri Bar has approved \$500, 000 to defend the state s process for selecting judges.

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The half-million-dollar war chest will be spent to protect the state s 67-year-old Nonpartisan Court Plan, which Gov. Matt Blunt and some members of the Legislature have attacked for being outdated and biased on behalf of trial attorneys.

The money will go to research, including focus groups and polling; public education programs and media advertisements; and a coordinator s salary.

According to bar Executive Director Keith Birkes, the coordinator likely will be an attorney charged with organizing efforts along with other pro-plan groups such as the Missouri Institute for Justice and Missourians for Fair and Impartial Courts.

The bar s board of governors approved the allocation of its memberships dues for its 2008 budget at a board meeting Nov. 16 in Jefferson City.

"It will help us be more nimble in this fight," bar President Charlie Harris told the 42 members of the board.

The funds are part of an ongoing effort to educate the public about the importance of a fair and independent judiciary, Birkes said. The bar this year budgeted about \$30,000 for public educational advertisements with the Missouri Broadcaster Association, a bar spokesman said.

Harris says the bar is taking the threat to alter the plan seriously, pointing out that the bar set up a blue-ribbon panel of lawyers available to research what a mandatory bar association is allowed to say and do with its funding. Additionally, a rapid response team was created to turn around legal research when inaccurate claims are made against the plan, the bar or the court, he said.

"That s keeping with my vision that we need to be more nimble as we focus on this fight," Harris

said.

Harris recently sent a letter to bar leaders urging them to support the judicial system in the upcoming legislation. He also has visited with appellate judges from throughout the state.

"I've been asking them, telling them, prodding them that if they think The Missouri Bar can carry this fight, they are crazy," he said. "It's going to take judges to get out there and do what we are doing."

Chief Justice Laura Denvir Stith has asked Harris to co-write a letter to members of the judiciary to join in the fight. The letter is expected to be sent out this week, Birkes said.

The bar's money is expected to be dwarfed by funding from opponents in a public information campaign as part of next year's elections, Birkes said. He also said other pro-plan political action committees, such as the Justice Institute for Missouri, have been actively raising money over the last year.

The board of governor's actions came after former Supreme Court Judge Chip Robertson's speech to bar members. Robertson had asked that they help preserve the plan from expected attacks and possible legislation designed to overhaul or tweak it.

Robertson has been helping raise funds and says political action committees are nearly halfway to their \$4 million goal.

He described the bar as an important ally in the fight to protect the plan.

"The bar has been as strong as horseradish in the fight that we are about to continue for at least the next full year if not longer," Robertson said.

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