

INTERVIEW: GARY FORSEE

The following is the full transcript of the Missouriian's interview with new UM System President Gary Forsee, which took place Feb. 4 at the president's residence on Providence Point Drive.

First of all, thanks for sitting down and taking time to chat.

I'm going down to Jeff City this afternoon, so we came over yesterday afternoon and filled up this morning with interviews. It worked out great.

What are you headed down to Jeff City for?

We have a Missouri 100 event this evening, and so we've got over 200 people coming. It's a combination of legislators and alumni of the university. So, I'm going to go down this afternoon and make some calls, get a chance to meet people. For most of these people, it will be my second time (meeting) with them. I've done the shaken hand routine with them, and this is a chance to go more in depth.

How did you become aware of the position and what interested in you in taking it at this moment in time?

Well, I was aware of it a year ago when Dr. (Elson) Floyd announced his resignation, and I was actually asked by the curators a year ago if there were any business people that I knew as they were starting to develop what their range of candidates would be – academic or business people – that would be interested. I think maybe produce some names. You know, help along the way at least one of the candidates that was being discussed, because I knew from where that that person had been working before. So, I was supporting the process but wasn't an active candidate at that stage, obviously, because I was still at Sprint Nextel at that point in time.

What is attractive about this position, which is obviously different from your previous line of work? Is it the challenge of overseeing this system? Entering academia, a place you hadn't been before?

It's just a unique opportunity, and part of that opportunity is a fact of the timing. As my timing changed, which it certainly did in the early fall and the opportunity was presented, then I started to give it serious consideration — started doing my own homework about what it would mean going from something I had done for 35 years to the academic world. So, I think it was the uniqueness of the opportunity and the timing, and those two came together.

Beyond that, it's an opportunity to take advantage of the skills I've developed in 35 years. I think it's an opportunity to give something back to the state, which I've spent most of my life being a part of, the university system, which I've been part of. And to hopefully make a difference and extenuate higher education in the state; obviously, and most importantly, to be sure that all of our stakeholders know how important the University of Missouri is as being a part of that. Though it's always a combination of factors that go into that, the trigger timing of the opportunity being available and the

triggering timing of me being available that's obviously the headline of a unique set of circumstances that came together.

What is entailed in the homework required to make this decision?

I reached out to some people in academia and talked to them about the position. I had the opportunity to talk to Dr. (Gordon) Lamb several times about the position, about the role, about the job. I had the chance to talk to a couple of individuals who came from the non-academic background about their experiences. Then I just started to sound out along the way, friends of the university whether those were students, faculty, alumni, curators current and former. So I tried to assimilate a picture of the opportunity, a picture of the university. And I also, which was somewhat public, went to Jeff City and talked with more of our key stakeholders that would be involved in the success of higher education in the state of Missouri. The leader of the university needs to step up and take charge, but there are others that are of particular importance – the executives of the state government, the legislature of the state government, our friends in Washington, D.C. – all play a role in that. I wanted a chance to sound them out about their views of higher education, and those were very positive conversations along the way.

Now that you're preparing to come into the position, what are some of the broad challenges facing the system? Is it state funding? Is it salaries for faculty and staff? Is it ensuring that charitable giving increases? Simply put, what do you want to tackle immediately coming through the door?

I've tried to get a jump start on that. As soon as the announcement on the 20th of December, it's been again good planning, good timing, or just luck, that it's turned out that I will have had almost two months to start that process. We talked a few minutes ago about what I did when considering this position, since the 20th of December I've probably been at meetings about a day or two a week. I've invited myself to trustees meetings, to the curators' meeting; I've come down to Columbia, this is my third time in Columbia, to spend time with the staff, to start to understand budgets – those types of things. I don't want to wait until the 18th and then start that learning process. I will have had almost two months, at my own pace, to work through that. I've talked with some faculty members; I was in St. Louis last week for the curators' meeting, and spent half a day on the UMSL campus. I spent some time at Rolla. I spent some time in Columbia. And I've spent some time in Kansas City. So I've been making rounds assimilating and forming a perspective about what those issues are.

I would say there are several things at the top of the list. I would say that the conversation in the state of Missouri about higher education needs to have a louder voice. That is something important in total: That our citizens know that higher education, and our ability to support that from a lot of different aspects, is important. Part of that is to reinforce the role that the University of Missouri plays in that. We have a unique requirement. We have a unique set of responsibilities to be sure about the university's role is important. That's the first point. The second point, is that we have to be sure that our four campuses and University Health Care, for the future, have a very clear mission strategy and objectives. Not that they haven't; I think they have. But as we look into the next few years, we have to be sure to paint a clear picture about what we want each of the

four campuses to have as their principle set of objectives. There again, it won't be Gary's Plan; rather, it will be our collective plan that supports that.

For example, our two institutions in St. Louis and Kansas City support two great cities and are very important. Most people would suggest that great American cities need to have great city universities. There's a special role that goes with universities related to the urban core; a special role that, therefore, goes along with insuring that K-12 is prepared to step in that city university context. So, I think with our unique role as a land-grant institution, and the requirements that go along with that, we have a policy responsibility that ought to extend more broadly. Again, I highlight what can go on in St. Louis and Kansas City. In Kansas City, there is a program called the Institute for Urban Education, which is extending into the urban core – extending in K-12 – offering students scholarships to the university who then turn around and give back to the community. That's just one example of our extension, if you will, and highlighting the importance of the four campuses' role.

I think the topic we talked about a minute ago, ensuring that faculties and students are prepared for the future (is crucial). I'm going to utilize the theme that we have had with preparing to care, which is preparing for our future. I've talked about our campuses. I've talked about our faculties and students. Distance learning, we have an extension responsibility. And distance learning and ensuring that our students are as prepared as they can be arriving in Columbia, Rolla, Kansas City and St. Louis is an important part of that. Our faculty has to be supported. We're not where we need to be on faculty salaries. We have a significant request before the General Assembly now in support of faculty salaries and support of ranked faculty. It's the highest of priorities I have coming in, to ensure that that's understood. It's the highest priority of the Board of Curators, as they emphasized last week at their meeting. So, from that perspective, it's very clear. If we don't care for that and nurture that, then all of this support system that we need to have to support our faculty and support research, and support getting great students, all that is hinged on support of our faculty system.

The final point that we have to prepare for is that we have some opportunities that are unique because we are in the state of Missouri. We have three of the great foundations in the world in our state —The Danforth Foundation, The Stowers Institute and The Kauffman Foundation — and our opportunity to declare that we are going to be world class in research development related to life sciences and that we're going to be world class in the area of entrepreneurship. We have foundations that are ready to support the university's vision in that regard. That's a unique opportunity. It's a moment in time, and we ought to take advantage of it.

You mentioned that this is not “Gary's Plan” and more of a collective effort. Where does the role of the president fit in under it? As you there to act as a catalyst and spur action? Are you there as a sounding board for provosts and chancellors to express their needs?

The role of the president is a critical one as the principal policy spokesman as it relates to higher education in the state. To some degree, that is unique to the role the university system plays in our state. I think the role of the president has to be to ensure that the system has a strategic plan and a vision of the future. But that plan only gets developed as a result of the work by the four campuses, the chancellors and University of

Missouri Health Care. The good news, and I think there is a general sense or recognition of this, is that we have momentum. Dr. Lamb did a very good job as interim president making sure that we didn't fall back or just wait until the new president was on board. And I think we have initiatives that are in place: The Missouri 100, Preparing to Care – which is something that is an incremental initiative request for funding – are things that are in flight and in motion. I think my biggest opportunity is to ensure that we're prepared for the future. So this is less around what has to be done on April 1st in 2008, than it is to ensure that we're going to be a very effective, a very leading and world-class (institution) related to where we're going to be five years from now. This is about ensuring that our future is as bright as our past has been. Making what's great today, and we have great things going on at each of our four campuses, and make sure they remain that way and make them better and taking things that need to be better and work on them. There's always a long list of those.

In that sense, and I'll try to get the phrasing precise here, while there are a lot of things that the system has going for it, what is holding it back from reaching its full potential?

I'm not really in a position, especially having not started the job, to critique what's gone on in the past. And I don't think that is energy that I'm going to spend a lot of time on. What I am going to spend a lot of time on is to get around the state and listen. Missouri 100 gives a forum to do that, but my own 100-day plan is to travel around the state and listen to alumni, listen to friends of the university, listen to business partners of the university – that's locally as well as nationally – to understand their points of view. The faculty and students on the four campuses are a critical part of that. From that, we will also convey what is unique about the university and be sure that there is a receiving mode on my part, which is part of my learning, to convey as we make our rounds. That's part of the dynamic and environment where resource dollars are going to be competed for, whether it's bridges that need to be repaired or the health care system that needs to be supported, or in our case the university system that needs to be supported. If you look at the last eight to 10 years, our support has declined. There's lots of reasons for that, absent a clear understanding about the important role we play in this state, the important role we play in economic development, (and) the important role that research plays. All that is tied together and I think this is one of the things that needs to be conveyed. And it's conveyed by having a strong faculty and faculty support system to make all of that work. So, it's an opportunity to reinforce what may be intuitively obvious to some people. But others, they may not have that appreciation. So it will give us a chance to, importantly, listen and to hear what those key stakeholders have in mind, but also to convey that we want you to know about the university.

Higher education experts I've spoken to say that the route the system has chosen to go in hiring someone with your non-traditional background, while not always the norm, is an increasing trend. In your opinion, is this signaling a shift toward a pseudo-business model in higher-ed where you go out and market your institutions' strengths?

Clearly, the job requirements, if you will, at the top leadership at a university or university system have evolved over time. As I said and commented to some of your colleagues, in the perfect world you'd have a steep academic background, accumulated

35 years of business acumen and away you go. But that would be a unique circumstance. What I'm trying to bring into the role is that 35 years of business acumen, but the starting point has to be an appreciation for what we do as a university, which is educate and train our youth. And the way we do that is with an outstanding faculty that is trained and motivated to those objectives. So it wouldn't be fair to say, "Well, the president just has to focus on funding and what's going on in Jefferson City, in Washington, and with business partners forming great relationships with them, and let the foundation of our institution be left in the hands of others." I can't do my job, and can't do it well, unless I have a steep appreciation for the faculty role, steep appreciation for what their needs are. They have to know I'm going to be their loudest advocate for support. I have to earn that, because they'll look at my resume and see that I came from some place different.

One of the first things I have to do is earn that understanding from faculty, earn that respect that they know I'm going to be their biggest supporter, their biggest advocate. Over time I'm going to gain an appreciation for the programs they work on. But out of the gate I'm going to be the biggest supporter for what their needs are. Hopefully, my business acumen can accelerate all the other aspects of that job. Which to your question, those things have changed over time; it's always been competitive. But if you look at the funding sources for this university, having gone from roughly 58 percent funding from state funds in 2000 to about 34 percent this year, that's a fact. Those facts then have to be dealt with in terms of alternative ways of getting funding or being more competitive for funding we do go after.

You mention being more competitive for funding. What other avenues exist for the system outside of our traditional state dollars that the system hasn't looked at?

We're going to take every advantage we can to find out where those best practices may be residing around the country. I think if you look at where we are with economic development and working with the state, there are clearly other states making more progress turning intellectual property into an economic development engine for the state. Similarly situated state universities have either had a head start or whatever; so Mike Nichols, the new vice president, has that as a responsibility at each of the four campuses. There are things that we have started, and if we can accelerate those to create incubation for the intellectual property that we develop that's a very good opportunity. Two weeks ago, Missouri University for Science & Technology announced an agreement with General Electric aircraft to create jobs in Rolla and positions at the university – again, the kind of business partnership that you know is not new. But a lot of businesses have scaled back research and development — what better way for businesses to take advantage of the best and brightest in the country by coming into the university system like the University of Missouri (System) and form those kinds of relationships. That's just one example of that opportunity. At the program level, I've already mentioned the Institute for Urban Education at (the University of Missouri) Kansas City, which is funded by private resources going in to fund that and raising foundation type money from businesses and residents in Kansas City for that program. Again, coming up with programs that can extend our mission and our objective, the energy of trustees on our four campuses can be incredible. We obviously have a \$1 billion campaign here in

Columbia, which five or six years ago would have been unheard of, but we're now within striking distance of achieving that goal.

So far in getting out to meet people around Missouri, what are they excited about right now regarding higher education? What are their hopes?

The enthusiasm has just been incredible. I've gotten literally hundreds of letters and phone calls since my appointment offering support. And that support hasn't come with a corollary list of things to go work on. But it's offering support, advice, perspective, offers a sit down. I think that rings so clear that that support is out there and widespread. It's not just limited to old friends in Kansas City; it's widespread from all four campuses around the state. The second point, is that what that implies is that's an energy we have to go tap into. It's a lot of people who can help convey the message about the university, and at the end of the day what we want is not just a university that is the best not only for Missouri but one of the best in the country. I think today we have so many examples of where we are – top 10 (or) top 5 at the program level or school level – so we've got a lot of successes to talk about. We have to be sure people know about that, so we can be proud of what we're about. As we do that, that impression of the university can be supported by facts. When we can put facts out in front of people to support that, then our mission is going to be better understood and achieve what I think we ought to, which is becoming one the top research institutions in the country, one of the top land-grant institutions in the country. And our place, by whatever set of measures, moves up because of that, supported again by strong faculty and a motivated set of four campuses that are achieving that.

On the flip side of that, there have been those voices out there – whether they be in editorials, articles, or out of faculty councils – that have said they are not keen on a person with your background stepping into this role. How do you go about calming their nerves about you becoming the new president of the system?

I've had the privilege of leading large organizations for years. For the past 20 years, the least number of people I've had working for me is 20,000. I had close to 100,000 people when I worked at Bell South, and 100,000 people at Sprint. You have to start by showing people that you respect what they do. That's fundamental if you're going to lead a successful organization, and you have to show that you respect the diversity of their thought, the diversity of them as a person. You have to engage with them and thank them for what they do. I said this at the announcement on the 20th: People have expectations of leaders. They expect their leader to reinforce the brand, the institution in our case, and be the spokesmen. They expect you to have a vision and long-term strategy. That strategy will be articulated over time. Then they also want to know how we're doing. Again, that's kind of one of those principles: If you lay something out there and it becomes a binder on the shelf and you don't ever come back and say, "How are we doing?" and report back, then they don't know their role. And they don't know how to support that. I think it's pretty fundamental. It starts with me showing respect that I want to learn what they do. They need to understand that there will be no louder spokesperson, they'll be no louder support for what they need than the leader of the organization. That's how it starts. At least in my experience, whether it's 50,000 employees serving customers, if you don't have a motivated set of employees serving customers – in this

case it's faculty serving students, faculty providing research, faculty accelerating what they do on campus – then we can't be effective. They have to hear that from me, and they will. I'm going to go out and be engaged with them quickly. I've already called each member of the faculty Senate one on one since the first of the year. I had coffee with a couple of them at my leisure. And again, I wanted them to hear from me this organization model is about how the leader supports what goes on at the institution level, which is about the faculty and students – not vice versa. This is not about how do we support Gary; this is about how we bolster what goes on at the institution.

You've been many places in your career and done quite a bit – headed up local, long-distance, wireless, and government divisions in telecom. What lessons will you try to draw upon and carry over into your tenure here?

You have to understand that organizations expect their leaders to be great communicators. During good times and bad times, a leader has to be out front. In the toughest times, the temptation is go away and close the door. But, you have to be out front, be visible, and communicating to the organization. You learn over time, that every organization is a lengthened shadow of its leader. That says it's 24-7; I don't turn it off when I go to Jeff City tonight. I'm representing the 20,000 employees and our 60,000 students. That's my role as part of the university.

The other aspect that the organization, in this case the Board of Curators, ought to expect that if you're the president to anticipate change and not react to change. What I mean by that, it's less important that I worry about what happens on April 1st than that we're planning for April 1st five years from now. We have to understand what challenges may be on the horizon. When you do that, sometimes you take risks, sometimes the status quo has to be looked at. But if you look out into the future and you can see opportunities and you can figure out in a prudent way to take advantage of that, and you've engaged all the stakeholders, then you should be expected to do that. I think that's what leaders ought to expect.

At Sprint, the pay is higher, the prestige greater, and the notoriety more widespread. You've been in that world, that corporate culture, for over three decades. Is there ever a temptation to return to that world?

No, I had a great 35-year business career. I had so many unique opportunities, whether it was running a global company in Europe, I ran the global operation for Bell South. I had great mentors, great bosses, great relationships along the way. I think I had a record of achievement. This is an opportunity is a chance to take those learnings and use them in a way that benefits our state and our university. And that's what I intend to do.

On the other side of that coin, you sat on the Board of Trustees at the University of Missouri-Rolla (now Missouri University of Science and Technology). You've been in charge of the most recent capital campaign. Did those experiences make you think, "I could do this full time as a career? Higher education is a place I'd like to try and go?"

That's a great question. I saw some things down there (at Rolla) that I thought were very inspiring. I saw what Rolla has done with technology. I saw what they have done with their student project groups, which is something that St. Louis and Kansas City

are doing and what Columbia is doing. I saw that a little more up close and personal. What a way to learn, because that learning in student groups is what you do in the real world. That's what you get out to a Sprint, a Boeing, or a General Electric. The fact that our faculty has been astute to develop those types of programs has been incredible. I saw that, got energized by that as I saw the trustees wanting to engage. Perhaps it has to do with generation, where my generation sees the opportunity to come back and lend support. There's an engaged group at Rolla. There's an engaged group in Kansas City. I invited myself to a trustee meeting there two weeks ago and saw that in action. I met many of the chancellor's council at UMSL last week. I think it's incredible when you see that energy coalesce around, "Look at what we're doing for our students. Look what we're doing for the youth of Missouri. Look what we're doing for the state." So that's pretty motivating. Seeing the ability to raise money for the institution. Seeing the change – (former chancellors) John Park, Gary Thomas, and now (current chancellor) John Carney – I had kind of a 15 (or) 16 year period of time being engaged at the university. I saw the university change for a lot of good reasons. I saw the anticipation of change. That certainly was part of the motivation.

Where does the MU campus fit into this picture and what is its role?

You know, I have seen it from all angles and all perspectives. I'm a product of Rolla. My daughters went to Columbia. My brother went to Columbia. My sister went to Columbia. My brother-in-law went to Columbia. Columbia ought to wear proudly on its sleeve that it is the flagship of the state, and there's no debate about that. We have four campuses and each has a unique mission in support of the university system. But it is what it is: Columbia is the flagship and how that gets described and highlighted and how much — that has to be discussed. I'm fine with that. I think everyone I talk to is fine with that. At the same time, you know, (Columbia) is looked up to as the flagship for higher education. So we have two flagship roles for the state, one for the state as a result of our status as a land-grant institution but the Columbia campus – there's no debate about that. How we described that, Columbia in or out, hey, I'm fine with that. I'll be the biggest supporter of that, of what Rolla does, of what MST does. I think I get it, and each campus has ... Part of my management style will be to ensure that each of the four chancellors has the autonomy and authority to do the right thing to make their institutions work well as part of an overall system strategic plan.