

Illinois Senate Holds Out for More Spending

Written by Rich Miller
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Illinois Senate President John Cullerton says he had a simple message for House Republican Leader Tom Cross in the waning hours of the spring legislative session: "See you in July."

As you probably know by now, Cullerton's Senate voted to add \$430 million to the House's austere state spending plan. The Senate initially wanted to spend a billion dollars more than the House, but many of Cullerton's Democratic members demanded that they at least get something, so they came up with a list totaling \$430 million.

House Speaker Michael Madigan couldn't agree to the additional spending unless Leader Cross also signed off, because the two had decided months earlier to stand together on the budget. Cross said he wouldn't agree to the additional Senate spending, even though Cullerton said he'd found a way to pay for it.

So Cullerton tacked his member requests onto the capital plan bill, which also contains road-construction money. The House refused to agree to the amendment, and Speaker Madigan announced that he wanted to appoint a conference committee to work out a deal over the summer.

No dice, said Cullerton. The Senate has no intention of acting on Madigan's request and wants

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a new bill, he said. Cullerton could be voted down by the other three caucuses in a conference committee, so that idea is out, he said.

And despite claims by House leaders in both parties that the administration can spend money approved this fiscal year on projects next fiscal year because the state's "lapse period" was extended out to six months, Cullerton believes that lots of road construction will stop very soon.

"They have the money," Cullerton explained, "but they have no authority to spend it."

Governor Pat Quinn agrees with Cullerton, saying all construction work will have to start shutting down after June 17.

Quinn has said that a special session may have to be held sometime soon to work out this problem, or, as Cullerton put it, "the second-largest road-construction season in the history of Illinois will come to a halt."

Cullerton said: "I won't be forcing a special session. The road-builders will."

Cullerton promised to reduce his caucus' budgetary add-on demand from \$430 million to \$280 million. He said he's backing away from \$150 million for the General State Aid program for schools. The House's budget keeps the official school spending level the same, Cullerton explained, but it deliberately under-funded the program by \$150 million. The legislature can come back in January and add back that cash, he said.

But how will he pay for these budget requests? Well, the Senate president said he purposely left out at least \$280 million in what are known as "trouts" from the budget-implementation bill to fund the increased spending he wants.

This may seem complicated, but it's not, so stay with me.

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Transfers out, or “trouts” as they’re more commonly called, are inserted into the budget-implementation bill every year to transfer cash from the state’s bank account into special funds. They’re done almost as a matter of course, but Cullerton decided to short some of the trouts this year to pay for his members’ requests. But the House Republicans wouldn’t go along with the plan, and that’s when Cullerton made his comment about seeing Leader Cross in July.

Cullerton also more than hinted that he plans to reintroduce his dollar-a-pack tax hike on cigarettes to help pay for the capital plan when the General Assembly returns – a proposal that has so far been rejected by the other three leaders.

As I write this, he’s also preparing to demand that both chambers come back to Springfield to pass a new legislative-furlough plan. The Senate introduced a 12-day furlough plan but never passed it. The House passed an identical proposal, but it’s still sitting in the Senate awaiting action.

The House, for its part, wants the Senate to come back to town on its own, back off its demand for that extra program spending, and then pass the furlough bill that the House already approved. But several members of the Senate president’s Democratic caucus are itching for a fight over that extra spending, as is the governor.

For right now anyway, nobody is backing down, and I’m not making any vacation plans.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.