

Quinn a Deciding Factor in Turning Back Senate Dems' Spending

Written by Rich Miller
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Governor Pat Quinn was willing to offer up only the tiniest of face-saving possibilities to the Illinois Senate Democrats last week: Drop your budget demands – and we'll talk about them this fall – but do it soon or bad things will happen.

On the last day of the spring legislative session, the Senate Democrats tried to add about \$430 million in extra state program spending to a bill that was supposed to only pay for construction projects. They tacked on the spending to force the House to bow to their demands. The idea was that the House would want to protect the construction projects so much that they'd be willing to accept the Senate's increased budget spending.

It didn't work.

The House Republicans refused to go along, and Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan wouldn't agree, either, because he'd made a budget pact with the Republicans months earlier. No spending would be approved without both parties first agreeing to it, and the Republicans used their veto power.

Even the Senate Republicans made it crystal clear that they were firmly opposed to anything other than a "clean" capital bill with no additional budget spending. The Senate Republicans have long made capital spending a top priority. They even broke ranks with Madigan to side with then-Governor Rod Blagojevich over passing a capital bill a few years ago.

But Senate GOP leader Christine Radogno has been the greatest advocate for keeping construction spending completely separate from the budget. Two years ago, when Quinn first agreed to that budget/capital separation and then attempted to combine the two anyway, Madigan publicly warned that Quinn would run into a "buzz saw" of opposition from Radogno. The governor eventually backed off.

Many road builders and the construction unions were also totally opposed to any sort of deal that mixed capital projects and the budget. Their opposition empowered Radogno.

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Quinn, who publicly sympathized for months with the Senate Democrats' desire to spend more money, couldn't even bring himself to jump on board the final Senate Democratic demand that the construction program be approved for just six months instead of 12 so that a new budget deal could be crafted in January.

The construction projects – including roads, bridges, schools, and a host of other things – are just too important to the economy to play games with, the governor reportedly told all four legislative leaders during a meeting last week. He also warned that construction projects would begin to shut down within a few days if a decision wasn't made quickly.

Quinn's attempt to tie the capital and budget issues together two years ago caused him big problems during last year's campaign. Unions representing the construction industry were so upset at the governor's games that they refused to endorse him until after Republican candidate Bill Brady moved way too far to the right. (Brady eventually backed a "right to work" plank.) The governor apparently learned his lesson.

With Quinn on the other side, the Senate Democratic members who pushed for that extra spending were completely surrounded by hostile forces. Failure looked imminent.

Many Senate Democrats who earlier disagreed with tying the extra spending to the construction projects had laid low for weeks. The last two caucus meetings about this topic had been exceptionally brutal. So they were naturally fearful of being subjected once again to the same way-over-the-top personal attacks that were levied at them during those end-of-session private meetings, which wound up forcing everybody down what turned out to be a dead-end street.

The Senate Democrats met together via teleconference the day after the governor sat down with the four legislative leaders. Without that face-to-face pressure of physically meeting together in Senate President John Cullerton's Statehouse office, the members who disagreed with the caucus' course were emboldened to speak out. Democrats who quietly took abuse in previous meetings jumped in early to say enough was enough and the battle needed to end.

The meeting lasted about an hour, and in the end they decided to back off. Quinn's decision to go against the Senate Democrats turned out to be the deciding factor. When you have a guy who's pushed for more spending all year suddenly decide to not push for more spending, it

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quickly became obvious that their attempt to spend more money had become a losing cause.

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