

Did Governor Break a Promise on Facility Closures?

Written by Rich Miller
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Several Downstate Illinois legislators were furious last week that Governor Pat Quinn decided to go ahead and close some state facilities, including prisons, in their districts.

They weren't just upset about the lost jobs, however. Some also claim that Quinn brazenly broke a deal on the closures. "If the governor proceeds with this, he has gone back on his word," Representative Mike Bost (R-Murphysboro) told a crowd gathered to protest the planned closures last week. Bost and others indicated that the trade was made over revenue issues, but he didn't get more specific.

Bost did not return a phone call, but he was almost surely referring to the cigarette-tax increase.

"We believe the governor's office was working members for votes on certain legislative initiatives in exchange for keeping facilities open," said Republican Leader Tom Cross' spokesperson, Sara Wojcicki Jimenez. She said there was no deal discussed among the four legislative leaders and the governor, but she did say when pressed that the cigarette-tax hike was among those "legislative initiatives."

Bost and a large handful of other House Republicans voted for the dollar-a-pack cigarette-tax hike, which received the bare-minimum majority of 60 votes in that chamber. The roll call was

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carefully structured in a bipartisan manner so that the bill could pass without forcing politically endangered members to vote in favor. No Senate Republicans voted for the cigarette-tax increase, but the Senate Democrats have repeatedly passed cigarette tax hikes on their own in the past, while the House Democrats couldn't (or wouldn't) muster enough votes to do so.

"False," replied Kelly Kraft, a top official with the governor's budget office, when told of the Cross claim. "No," Kraft said when asked if there was any truth to the widespread claims and rumors of some sort of deal on the tax hike and facility closures.

There were a ton of rumors floating around the last couple days of the spring session on what, exactly, was going on with the facility closures. One Downstate Democrat who represents a district that includes a slated-for-closure prison insisted last week that a Quinn administration official had testified to a House appropriations committee toward the end of session that if the General Assembly put the money back in the budget to keep the targeted facilities open, the governor would probably keep them open.

But Representative Louis Arroyo, who chairs the House Appropriations Public Safety Committee, and the committee's minority spokesperson, Representative David Reis, both said that no such claim was ever made by the governor's office at any of their hearings. Instead, they said, the Quinn official merely said when pressed on the budget question that maybe the administration could consider keeping the facilities open, but made clear that she could not speak for the governor.

And it turns out that the cigarette-tax trade rumors could very well be false as well. "To my knowledge there never was a deal," said Representative Jim Watson (R-Jacksonville). Watson was one of the House Republicans who voted for the cigarette-tax hike and has a facility in his district that's slated for closure in August.

Apparently, members on both sides of the aisle attempted to push their leaders to force some sort of a quid pro quo with Quinn on the cigarette-tax hike and the facility closures. But that never happened.

Quinn was obviously making deals near the end of session, so an eagerness to cut a deal on the cigarette-tax hike was understandable at the time.

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What appears to have happened on the cigarette-tax hike was that legislators went ahead and voted for the proposal with the hope that their good will would persuade Quinn to keep an open mind once the time came to decide whether to shutter the facilities.

Quinn ignored the wishes of the House members who stuck out their necks for him and, at the Statehouse, that's almost as bad as breaking a deal with them. They probably won't be helping out the governor again any time soon.

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