

Votes Show Pension Reform a Long Way Off

Written by Rich Miller
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House Speaker Michael Madigan was hoping on March 7 to avoid the same results as the previous week.

Back then, one of his pension-reform proposals received just one vote – his own. None of his other pension amendments received more than five votes.

That wasn't supposed to happen. Members of his leadership team thought some of those amendments would get at least a few dozen votes. Oops.

Making matters worse, the House Republicans refused to even participate in the process, with not a single member voting up, down, or "present" on Madigan's amendments.

Asked about the GOP refusal to vote, Madigan on last Wednesday's *Illinois Lawmakers* television program said he believed the Republicans had made a "mistake."

"They're elected," Madigan told host Jak Tichenor. "And their electors tell them to come here and vote. They don't tell them to come here and not participate."

The Republicans have said that their refusal to vote was a protest over Madigan running

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“gotcha” amendments that were designed solely to collect fodder for negative advertising campaigns. But, in reality, they’re gonna get zinged no matter what. Refusing to vote on a series of controversial bills could easily be turned into a nasty advertising program.

Last week, however, party discipline cracked just a little when two House Republicans broke ranks and voted for a Madigan-sponsored amendment to cap the “pensionable” income of government workers at Social Security’s taxable-income cap. That means no pension benefits can be earned based on any public-employee income above \$113,000, or whatever Social Security sets the level at in the future.

Representatives David Harris (R-Arlington Heights) and David McSweeney (R-Barrington Hills) both voted “yes” on the amendment, while all other Republicans refused to vote. McSweeney also voted “yes” on two other Madigan amendments: freezing cost-of-living increases for 10 years and requiring active employees to chip in an extra 4 percentage points of their paychecks to the pension systems. Like the week before, when Madigan introduced similarly extreme measures, both of those amendments got just a handful of votes.

A much more comprehensive pension-reform proposal sponsored by state Representative Elaine Nekritz (D-Northbrook) and Illinois House Republican Leader Tom Cross is expected to move through a committee this week. But don’t expect a floor vote any time soon. Cross’ people say publicly that they have 30 votes for the bill, but some insiders are saying otherwise, with one claiming that the number is more like 20.

The Democrats might not even have that many.

While the Democrats have a super-majority in the House, they aren’t much closer to passing a major pension-reform bill now than they’ve been in the past. Most Democratic legislators by nature just don’t like the whole idea of forcing cuts on retirees or making them pay more for things such as health insurance, or slapping workers with higher pension contributions.

And to see how this pension-reform problem is stacking up, you might want to take a look at last week’s roll call for a bill to allow people who’ve been convicted of drug-related felonies to receive cash from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

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The bill received just 36 “yes” votes, with 80 voting “no.” The roll call provides a pretty good road map for where the real liberals are in that chamber. The “yes” votes are generally the folks who will be far less willing to vote to cut retiree pensions and to favor alternative solutions such as tax hikes and placing the burden on the more well-off.

So doing something such as capping pensionable income at \$113,000 makes sense to most of those more-liberal Democrats. Just two members who voted for the TANF drug-felony bill voted against the income cap. Representative Naomi Jakobsson (D-Urbana) was one of them, for an obvious reason: She has lots of highly paid University of Illinois employees in her district.

“My sense of the attitude of the members of the legislature is that they’re not yet ready to take this difficult step” of voting for pension reform, Madigan said on the TV program, saying he is holding the pension votes to “better educate the members of the House and the Senate.”

The bottom line is that it’s going to be a while before legislators are “educated” enough to get to a resolution of this very thorny issue.

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