Written by Jeff Ignatius
Tuesday, 09 January 2001 18:00

Two major issues will dominate discussion in the Illinois General Assembly this year, but one will probably knock the other out of the picture for a few years. Uncertainty surrounding re-drawing Illinois' state and federal legislative districts will probably scare the General Assembly away from passing bills of much significance or controversy, said State Senator Denny Jacobs (D-Moline). The losers will likely be champions of reforming the way the state distributes money to public schools, and that's not the only issue that will get short shrift. "A lot of things aren't going to be done that should be done," Jacobs said.

The 92nd General Assembly will be inaugurated January 10, but it's not likely to be a very active body. "The leadership will try to ensure that nothing controversial hits the floor," Jacobs said.

That's because re-districting, in theory, represents a threat to all legislators. The process in Illinois is structured so that it's possible – likely even, according to some – that the party that will control political power in Springfield for the next decade or so will be determined by literally drawing a name out of Lincoln's stovepipe hat.

"It's purely a gamble," said Illinois Representative Michael Boland (D-Moline). Until a new legislative map is approved, members of the General Assembly will tread lightly because they don't know whom their constituency will be, or whether they'll be forced to run against another incumbent. And if the legislature doesn't draw the map, districts won't be finalized until long after the General Assembly has adjourned for the spring.

The state is required by its constitution to do a remap following every census, and the process starts in the legislature. If an agreement can't be reached by June 30 – a good possibility, given that Republicans control the Senate and Democrats the House – the task of remapping is handed to an eight-member commission, with four members chosen by Republicans and four by Democrats. If there is still no map by August 5, Illinois Secretary of State Jessie White will draw one name – out of two submitted, one from each party – from a hat on September 5. That person's vote determines whether the state's legislative districts get drawn by Democrats or Republicans.

Following the 1980 census, the name of a Democrat was drawn from the hat, and in 1990, the GOP won the contest of chance.

Boland guessed that the random drawing would for the third straight decade determine which party controls the mapping process for the next 10 years' legislative elections.

But Jacobs said that both parties might be willing to agree to what is basically a status-quo state legislative map, one that would protect incumbents and give each party a majority in (and thus control of) one chamber. The Republican-drawn map of 1991 has resulted in a relatively stable, predictable, and balanced electoral pattern, something that might appeal to the parties more than the potential of wild swings from all-powerful to impotent.

The wild card could be the districts for the U.S. House. Because Illinois' share of the country's population fell between 1990 and 2000, the state will lose one seat in the House, and the

re-districting process will decide whether a Democrat- or Republican-leaning district gets axed. That could become contentious among legislators who otherwise agree to maintain the state's balance of power.

A compromise map in the legislature would free up the House and Senate to deal with other important issues. Most legislators agree that the biggest is education funding.

"That will be a gargantuan struggle," Boland said. Three years ago, pressure from the public and school districts prompted the General Assembly to address the issue. But the distribution of state funds to schools is a politically loaded issue, with Chicago, suburban, and downstate schools all facing different challenges and funding levels. The legislature basically chickened out with a three-year school-aid formula that established a minimum per-pupil funding level and guaranteed that no school district would lose state aid. That formula expires June 30.

The formula was also supposed to guarantee that each school district would get a modest increase in state funding, but Jacobs said that United Township High School, for example, is in its third year without a funding increase.

Jacobs said that he hopes the General Assembly takes a serious look at the issue, noting that more than 300 school districts in Illinois spend less money per-pupil than Mississippi, which has over the past decade been last among states in per-student education funding.

So will the legislature choose yet another short-term fix for school funding? "Probably," Jacobs said, "and that's unfortunate."

Boland was slightly more optimistic, but not much. "It has to be done one way or the other," he said. "Perhaps we can make it at least a bigger, wider Band-Aid."