

Legislator Learns to Say “No”

Written by Rich Miller

Tuesday, 25 February 2003 18:00

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Illinois State Representative Julie Hamos (D-Chicago) begged me last week not to make her out to be some kind of lone-wolf hero or get her in trouble with her fellow legislators. But what she did rates a notice.

Hamos was the only Democrat to vote against an expensive health-care bill in committee last week. The bill was a standard anti-HMO bill that always used to fly out of the Democrat-controlled House, where it would be summarily buried in the Republican-controlled Senate Rules Committee – a notorious black hole for liberal proposals.

The bill's estimated cost was about \$40 million. The state is already running a \$4.8- billion deficit, so Hamos refused to support the idea. That “no” vote killed the bill, because every Republican on the committee sided with her.

It's always much easier to vote for a colleague's bill, Hamos explained later, particularly when that fellow member is just a few feet away looking you right in the eye. But the “old order” of things, where the House passed whatever it wanted knowing that the conservative Senate would kill it, has been, Hamos said, replaced by a “new order,” where legislators must now be “policymakers.”

The Democrats run the Senate now, and that chamber is so far eagerly spending money. The Senate Revenue Committee passed all sorts of tax breaks last week (as did the House Revenue Committee).

I doubt that very many others will follow Hamos' lead, and my cynical self wonders how long her own courage will last. Like she said, the path of least resistance is to support legislation backed by your colleagues. That way, they are more likely to support your bills. By voting against costly proposals, Hamos might be endangering her own legislative agenda, which is a big reason why she didn't want me to write this story.

But somebody out there needs to start saying “no” to these bills. The House Speaker is content to pass everything and let either the Senate Democrats or the governor sort things out. The Senate Dems have just been released from 10 years of harsh Republican control, so they are understandably eager to get their own ideas to the governor's desk.

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That leaves it up to Governor Rod Blagojevich. But the governor can't even make up his mind about whom to appoint to a handful of agency-director jobs. Figuring out which of the thousands of bills he should oppose and which ones he should support is way too advanced for the rookie governor. So, instead of quietly killing legislation that could literally bankrupt an already broke state government, and thereby avoiding lots of high-profile fights with traditional Democratic groups that supported his election, everything could end up on his desk, where he might have no choice but to use his veto pen.

Meanwhile, the governor's people said last week that Blagojevich will most likely allow the current fiscal year's \$1.2-billion deficit to roll over into next fiscal year.

This is not a good thing. Many of the state's bills are being paid almost two months late, with some vendors griping that they have been owed money much longer. We've already borrowed a billion dollars that we have no way of paying back – even though the note comes due in a few months. It goes on, but you get the idea.

Cuts made this fiscal year will have a direct impact on next fiscal year. For instance, immediately eliminating a \$100-million state program would save, let's say, \$33 million by the end of this fiscal year (because the current fiscal year is almost two-thirds over), and it would save the full \$100 million next fiscal year. But waiting until next fiscal year to achieve the same result would require eliminating the \$100- million program and then finding another \$33 million in cuts.

Most people figure that the latest pronouncement from Team Blago means that the state will have to borrow more money just to make ends meet. But that only pushes off the problem into the very uncertain future.

The governor's people have asked for more time to get their act together, but the clock is ticking. Debt is piling up and bills are moving through the General Assembly that would add millions of dollars to the fiscal crisis, but the governor's office is doing nothing because it doesn't know what it is doing.

Blagojevich is creating the conditions for a massive fiscal train wreck later this spring. He'd better hope his budget guys have some real magic up their sleeves.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax, a daily political newsletter. He can be reached at (<http://www.capitolfax.com>).