

## Does Illinois' Governor Have a Plan?

Written by Rich Miller  
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Governor Rod Blagojevich has spent less time in Springfield than any governor in memory. Instead, he's either stayed close to his Chicago home or gallivanted around the rest of the state holding press conferences touting his programs and blaming his problems on a General Assembly that has, in reality, mostly tried (in vain) to work with him.

But now, after all the governor's needless campaign-style posturing, the General Assembly is down to the last nine days of its spring session, and there's a lot to do.

As of this writing, Governor Blagojevich has met just twice with the four legislative leaders to talk about the budget, and both of those meetings were devoid of much substance.

The governor was in Springfield last Tuesday, but left for Chicago that evening to hold a press conference Wednesday, and he said he wouldn't be back until the following Tuesday. His absence from Springfield last week was mostly excusable, however, because he participated in the national terrorism drill.

Still, as I write this, nine days remain.

In those nine days the General Assembly has to pass an O'Hare Airport expansion bill, get behind a gaming-expansion bill, and craft a budget. Without O'Hare expansion, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley will be livid, and the governor has studiously avoided angering that guy. Without a revenue-rich gaming bill, the gov will have no money to fund his budget. And without a budget ... well, no one can go home without that.

Complicating matters, Chicago's O'Hare proposal stunned Republicans and Democrats alike with its imperialist bent. A subsequent compromise would limit the mayor's land grab and add a minority-contractor provision, among other things. But finding the votes to pass it will require the governor to be present and accounted for.

State Representative Lou Lang (D-Skokie) is diligently working on a gaming compromise, but there's no guarantee at all that the Senate Democrats will go along with it, even if Lang can

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wrap up the negotiations and move it through the House. And House Speaker Michael Madigan has said he doubts any gaming bill can pass without the governor taking a stand and getting involved.

Also making life more difficult, the House Democrats and Republicans teamed up last week to add more than \$300 million to Blagojevich's budget, mostly in education spending. And downstate House Democrats are demanding that – in exchange for their votes for O'Hare – the governor restore the \$600 million he cut from the state's road-construction program.

That \$600-million cut, by the way, will result in the loss of 11,000 high-paying jobs – even though the governor vowed not to balance his budget on the backs of working men and women.

The governor himself has privately expressed concerns to legislative leaders about his own proposal to eliminate a sales-tax exemption on commercial trucks. The plan was supposed to bring in more than \$90 million. The gov has also told the leaders he's concerned about his idea to slap a \$10-million tax on out-of-state natural gas.

Add it all up and the gov has a brand new \$1-billion hole in his budget. And that doesn't include all the other hugely unpopular and possibly unpassable cuts and higher fees in his spending plan.

And the fun continues. House downstaters in both parties are insisting that the state's nursing-home-funding formula change this summer as originally scheduled. The Republicans are threatening to withhold their votes from any gaming-expansion bill if this isn't done. The new funding formula would benefit downstate nursing homes.

This issue appears to be a gigantic mess. A very influential nursing-home association is lobbying against the formula change and has been working with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) on a bed-tax increase. The association, in exchange, has agreed to allow SEIU to represent 20 percent of its member facilities. SEIU, in case you've forgotten, is the union that made Rod Blagojevich governor.

Considering the lateness of the date, it looks to some like the governor is deliberately attempting to push this session into overtime. For what possible reason, no one can quite fathom. Overtime session means his budget will require a three-fifths majority to pass – and that means the Republicans, who are the minority in both chambers, will be able to dictate the terms of a compromise.

Others just think the governor has no real plan.

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