



State Will Spend \$3 Billion Less Than Last Year

Legislature passes budget; pension reform will wait.

By [Steve Sadin](#) | [Email the author](#) | 2:44pm

An Illinois state budget that will reduce spending by approximately \$3 billion from the last fiscal year passed the state Senate Monday night and will go to Gov. Patrick Quinn for his signature. The spending plan is \$1 billion less than Quinn originally proposed.

The total budget package for the 2012 fiscal year, which begins July 1, is \$59.1 billion, according to information provided by state Senate President John J. Cullerton's (D-Chicago) office.

Despite the cuts, local legislators felt the process was painful but more open and bipartisan than in the past. Debate was difficult but it produced the best possible results in a difficult economy, [state Sen. Susan Garrett \(D-Lake Forest\)](#) said.

"You may not agree with the outcome, but there was much more input and transparency than in the past," Garrett said. "The process was very transparent."

[State Rep. Elaine Nekritz \(D-Northbrook\)](#) also cited difficulty of the process but recognizes its necessity.

"The hard work is done--it has been very difficult," Nekritz said. "We had to make significant cuts. While I may not have liked the outcome we have to stop spending beyond our means."

Deep cuts

A year ago, the state spent \$62.1 billion. Only expenditures on human services were spared, getting an increase of about \$300 million, according to Cullerton's office. Education, public safety, business development and other categories were all reduced.

The effort of the Democratic majority in the General Assembly to work with Republicans also helped make the budget effort a success, according to [state Rep. Robyn Gable \(D-Evanston\)](#).

"This was a new process this year with a bipartisan approach," Gable said. "We were fiscally responsible. We were able to make deep cuts and still help our most vulnerable."

Like Gable, Garrett expressed concern for the citizens with the greatest needs. Garrett told Patch that she voted against the human services budget because she feels more should be spent on the state's most vulnerable citizens during [the hardest economic times](#) since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

“This needed to be more fully funded,” Garrett said explaining that the unemployed, mentally ill and disabled need the state’s help. “We should have taken a harder look at taking care of people who cannot take care of themselves.”

Using a scalpel

In the state House of Representatives, the effort to work through the human services was exceptionally hard, according to [state Rep. Karen May \(D-Highland Park\)](#). She credits state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago) for an effort that was as humane as possible.

“I’m thankful [Feigenholtz] used a scalpel rather than making wholesale cuts,” May said.

The spending cuts along with the state income tax increase passed in January result in a balanced budget without borrowing, despite reductions from the general revenue fund.

Last year, the state had one-time economic stimulus funds of \$1.4 billion from the federal government. This year the state is using approximately \$4.3 billion from its general revenue collections to fund money due for state pensions from years past.

The [tax hike](#) is projected to provide approximately \$7 billion of the money needed.

The General Assembly took its job seriously after passing a tax hike in January as members knew cuts were necessary. Most were not happy with the cuts made but were resigned to the need.

“The deal is distasteful,” said [state Rep. Daniel Biss \(D-Evanston\)](#). “We did the best we could with the dollars available. We did a good job at that.”

With billions of dollars in unpaid bills, the legislators were careful to make sure funds were available for this year's obligations, which cannot be paid in the current fiscal period ending June 30.

“The budget is very austere because we have billions of dollars in unpaid bills,” May said. “Our goal is to attain financial stability.”

Pension reform will wait

In other business Monday, the General Assembly did not vote on a pension reform bill proposed by House minority leader Rep. Tom Cross (R-Oswego), choosing to wait until the fall session. The proposal would have changed benefits for existing employees.

Current workers for the five pension funds administered by the state would have to pay more for their current pension benefits, pay the same amount for reduced benefits or have their retirement funds put in a 401(k) type fund.

“It’s great,” Biss said of the delay. “This is a very important issue. It needs extensive input.” He explained a significant part of the state’s budget currently goes toward pension contributions and it will continue to grow in the future.

Editor's note: Patch contacted State Sen. Jeff Schoenberg (D-Evanston) for comment on this story but he was unable to return phone calls before deadline.