

Budget, gambling, pensions top state lawmakers' to-do list

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State lawmakers return to Springfield Tuesday to begin the final three days of their annual veto session.

It's OK to feel a sense of déjà vu.

When they arrived to start the session two weeks ago, lawmakers faced dealing with issues like gambling expansion, budget balancing, pension changes and regional school superintendent pay.

When they return, they will face dealing with issues like gambling expansion, budget balancing, pension changes and regional superintendent pay.

Lawmakers are scheduled to be in session Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Here's where things stand as they head into the home stretch.

The budget

Working groups of House and Senate budget experts met several times last week to discuss options for plugging holes in the current state budget. That includes both finding money to avoid layoffs and facility closures ordered by Gov. Pat Quinn and to beef up spending on human-service programs cut last spring.

"Some of the cuts were very severe," said Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, chair of the House Appropriations-Human Services Committee. "We're getting responses from providers about some pretty dire consequences."

So far, though, there's no agreement on what to do, or even when.

"It's not soup yet," said Sen. Matt Murphy, R-Palatine, the Senate Republicans' point person on the budget. "There is an effort to try to prioritize (spending) within the spending limit that was set. It's a question of whether or not we will be successful or when."

Both Murphy and Feigenholtz indicated some budget decisions could be postponed beyond the veto session because it will take a supermajority vote to reallocate money now.

Quinn has urged lawmakers to sustain the \$376 million in vetoes he made to the budget and redirect the money to other uses. However, \$276 million of that was cut from Medicaid. Murphy and Feigenholtz both said those bills will have to be paid sometime.

“It is reallocation of debt. It is not real money,” Feigenholtz said.

“We don’t consider that real savings,” Murphy said, noting that there are other areas in which to find money. Lawmakers actually put more money into the pension systems than was required this year, he said, and there is \$54 million in violence-prevention funding that’s been sitting unused. That alone would cover the cost of keeping state facilities open and avoiding layoffs, he said.

Feigenholtz said lawmakers are concerned about Quinn’s proposed facility closures that include the Logan Correctional Center and the Jacksonville Developmental Center, particularly since they do not seem well planned.

“We are all concerned about doing it safely,” she said.

Lawmakers will also be asked to consider a package of business tax breaks intended to keep Sears and two commodities exchanges from moving out of the Chicago area. The package could include a higher earned income tax credit for low-income wage earners and a higher income tax deduction. Funding would come from eliminating another business tax break.

Gambling

Senate President John Cullerton, D-Chicago, said last week the Senate will take up a revised gambling expansion bill when lawmakers return. It will not be the “framework” for an acceptable gaming bill outlined by Quinn.

“It will look a lot like the bill that we already passed,” said Rep. Lou Lang, D-Skokie, lead negotiator on gaming legislation in the House. “What the governor proposed cannot pass.”

Quinn said he was OK with five new casinos, but would not accept slot machines at horse racing tracks. The gambling expansion bill was never sent to Quinn for his signature, but he said he would veto the bill if it arrived on his desk as is.

“We cannot pass a gaming bill (in the House) that leaves out slot machines at race tracks,” Lang said. “I think the governor’s attitude about slots at racetracks is a slap at the agricultural community.”

Lang said the revised gaming bill “may require some adjustments to the fairgrounds.”

The original bill allowed slots at the Illinois State Fairgrounds with the revenue to be used for capital improvements there. Lang said that if the new bill deletes slots at the fairgrounds, a provision will be included to pay for capital improvements on the grounds, possibly through a grant from gaming revenue.

With Quinn threatening to veto a bill that contains slots at tracks, lawmakers will have to pass an expansion bill with a veto-proof majority. Lang said he thinks that is possible because many lawmakers are upset with the governor.

“The threatened closure of facilities and the desire of the governor to leave agribusiness out of the gaming bill have left some legislators pretty ticked off,” he said. “You saw in the Com-Ed bill what happens when legislators get angry.”

Lawmakers quickly and decisively overrode Quinn’s veto of a bill giving Commonwealth Edison and Ameren financial incentives to upgrade their infrastructure.

Regional superintendents

It's now been four months and counting since regional school superintendents received a paycheck from the state. During that time, three have left the job and another is headed out the door. Several assistant superintendents, whose salaries were also eliminated by Quinn, have left.

A bill is pending to pay regional superintendents with money from the personal property replacement tax. It had an inauspicious debut. It failed on an initial vote, but it may be reconsidered this week.

Madison County regional superintendent Bob Daiber believes misinformation about the bill is partly to blame. Some local governments that now share in the personal property replacement tax thought the regional superintendent bill would take away all of their money and lobbied against it. Regional superintendents have been out trying to convince lawmakers that won't be the case. They need to secure 71 votes in the House for the bill to pass. It got only 59 on the first try.

Daiber said late last week that the regional superintendents have made progress securing the necessary votes, but they didn't have them yet. The bill's sponsor, Rep. Frank Mautino, D-Spring Valley, could not be reached for comment.

Lawmakers do not believe overriding Quinn's veto of the salary money is a realistic option. Quinn could still refuse to release the money, putting regional superintendents right back where they are now.

Pensions/state employees

A plan to change pension benefits for current state employees could still come up, although an increasing number of lawmakers have doubts it will surface during the veto session. The plan would require employees to either pay more to keep their benefits, accept a less lucrative plan and pay less, or join a 401(k)-style plan.

Sara Wojcicki Jimenez, spokeswoman for House Minority Leader Tom Cross, R-Oswego, said Republicans plan to file an amendment to the bill next week. She declined further comment.

A study conducted by actuaries for the Teachers' Retirement System determined the plan is flawed and could actually cost the state more money rather than save on pension costs.

Lawmakers could also consider a resolution sponsored by House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, that would set limits on union pay raises that could be negotiated by the Quinn administration next year. Madigan said that will essentially give lawmakers a voice in the upcoming negotiations, talks from which they are usually excluded.

The resolution, if adopted, says the General Assembly will not fund wage or benefit increases beyond an amount to be set by the House Revenue Committee.

Committee chairman Rep. John Bradley, D-Marion, said he and the ranking Republican on the committee, Rep. David Harris of Arlington Heights, will determine that number next week.

"We'll sit down in a bipartisan manner and try to arrive at a reasonable amount," Bradley said. "I don't know how long it will take to come up with that number. I don't know if we'll get a vote next week."

The resolution, which must be approved by both the House and Senate, is not binding on Quinn.

“He can choose to ignore it, but it probably will not go over too well,” Bradley said.

Clean coal

Lawmakers could vote again on legislation that would enable construction of a \$3.5 billion clean coal technology plant in Taylorville. The bill was defeated on an initial vote during the first week of the veto session.

Cullerton is sponsoring the bill. A spokeswoman said Friday a decision hasn't been made about trying another vote. A spokesman for Tenaska, the company that would build the plant, could not be reached for comment.

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