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Lawmakers show no love for Blagojevich's latest budget

Saturday, February 23, 2008 11:10 PM CST

Illinois lawmakers weren't completely dismissive of Gov. Rod Blagojevich's budget proposal Wednesday.

They were just nearly completely dismissive.

Blagojevich outlined a \$58 billion spending plan that includes election-year tax rebate checks, an expansion of health insurance programs and a long-sought statewide construction program.

But the financial foundation upon which his plan is built left most members of the General Assembly shaking their heads.

At a time when the state already is months behind in paying its bills, the governor wants to borrow money to send out the rebate checks. He wants to sell the lottery to pay for a statewide construction program.

He also offered tax cuts to certain businesses, while calling for an increase in other business taxes to pay for an expansion of healthcare.

State Rep. David Reis, R-Willow Hill, summed it all up this way:

"It seems like you're putting a dollar in one pocket and taking five out of the other," Reis said.

The short speech

Not only did Blagojevich offer up tax cuts to Illinoisans, he chopped the time he usually spends delivering his spe normal 45 minutes, the governor kept it at an incredibly brief 23 minutes.

What's more, the governor ended the decades-long tradition of giving off-the-record briefings about the budget to

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the media on the day before his speech.

State Sen. Bill Brady, R-Bloomington, thinks he knows why.

"I think it's probably a good tactical move given what he put in his speech. There's nothing there," Brady said.

State Sen. Dale Risinger, R-Peoria, said the lack of any budget briefings made him think the governor may be on his latest budget plan.

"If it's so great, why not get it out there and get it to us, get it to the media get it to the voters," Risinger said.

Senate Minority Leader Frank Watson, R-Greenville, described it another way:

"This was a fluff speech again. There wasn't a lot of detail and it wasn't very long," Watson said.

Elements of trust

Blagojevich faces an uphill battle on most of his initiatives. But it's not only because lawmakers don't like some of his ideas. They don't trust him.

State Rep. Roger Eddy, a Republican from Hutsonville, was in a more forgiving mood Wednesday.

"I'm hopeful that we don't just dismiss everything because he said it," Eddy said. "I'm afraid we're getting to that point where if he says it, it must be bad."

"Let's look at it and give him a chance to prove it or not prove it and go from there," Eddy said.

The Madigan factor

After the governor's speech, House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, issued a terse statement that essentially said what Blagojevich said and instead noted that he will hold a series of regional budget hearings, separate and apart from what the governor wants to do.

Madigan said he doesn't want a repeat of last year's lengthy overtime session.

Senate President Emil Jones, D-Chicago, doesn't want another overtime session either. But, he said the speaker should negotiate.

"You cannot sit back and chop holes in everything one attempts to do and then say you want to get out of here easily," Jones said.

Tricky Dick?

In addition to sending people checks worth \$300 for every child, the governor also wants to give some businesses tax breaks.

That drew a barb from state Rep. Bill Mitchell, R-Forsyth.

"This is like the new Nixon was. This is the new Blagojevich, the tax cutter," Mitchell said.

State Rep. Mike Boland, D-East Moline, said he doesn't think rebate checks are a good idea.

"Rather than just sending us a check that will just buy more goods in China, so it'll be a great stimulus for China, the money into the things that we need, we'll make some real progress," Boland said.

Lottery doubts

The governor wants to sell the lottery in order to pay for the construction program. That idea also didn't sit well with many who fear that it would blow a \$600 million hole in the budget.

"If somebody can buy that and pay us that kind of money, then why can't we run it and get all that money ourselves?" Boland said.

Pat Verschoore, D-Milan.

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