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Impeachment talk could reheat this summer

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill.

As the Legislative session ended Saturday, House Speaker Michael Madigan sent a clear message about all that's standing between Gov. Rod Blagojevich and impeachment proceedings.

Asked if the embattled governor would need to face a criminal indictment before lawmakers would seek to boot him from office, Madigan replied: "It's going to take 60 votes in the House."

The response drew chuckles from reporters peppering the House speaker at a rare Capitol news conference. But it underscored just how far talk of impeachment has come in recent months -- and how quickly it could become a reality under the right conditions.

Some fear the governor could be asking for trouble if he brings lawmakers back to town this summer to fix an out-of-whack budget.

"He doesn't want to stir up the natives and have them start talking about impeachment and all this other kind of stuff," said Sen. Donne Trotter, D-Chicago. "It works out for everybody not to do what we did last year again."

Impeachment talk first surfaced almost a year ago, when fighting between Blagojevich and lawmakers reached a new level. Two Republicans sick of being called into daily special sessions in early July asked Democrats who run the House to consider the unprecedented step of impeaching the governor.

"We're talking about the potential of using these sessions to remove the executive officer of the state of Illinois for malfeasance of office," said Rep. Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville.

Colleagues quickly brushed aside the idea.

"I don't think we are prepared nor should we go down that road at this time," said Rep. Bill Black, R-Danville.



But that has changed recently.

The House voted in April for a proposed constitutional amendment that would let voters recall the governor and other top officials. Blagojevich's allies in the Senate then blocked it.

Allegations also surfaced in April in the federal trial of a top Blagojevich fundraiser that one official received a top job on a state board after making a \$25,000 donation to the governor and talking with Blagojevich about the appointment. The administration says it doesn't do business that way.

That prompted two House Democrats to call for formation of a committee to explore impeachment. Madigan confirmed Saturday that his top lawyer has researched how to pursue impeachment proceedings.

"It's just to be prepared, that's all," Madigan said.

There could be a test in just a few weeks because Blagojevich wants lawmakers to fix the budget before the July 1 start of the new budget year. If the fighting starts again, some wonder if the House will begin impeachment talks.

But there are logistical and political obstacles to impeachment.

The Constitution doesn't specify what triggers impeachment, and gives separate duties to the two chambers.

The House can investigate and move to impeach executive and judicial branch officials; the Senate then conducts a trial and votes on whether to impeach. It takes an extraordinary vote of two-thirds of the 59-member Senate for impeachment.

Even if the House would vote for impeachment proceedings, the Senate -- led by Blagojevich ally Emil Jones -- could spare him.

And there would be plenty of back-and-forth on both sides.

"It's hard to imagine that House members would start impeachment proceedings over being called back to Springfield to fix the \$2 billion hole in the budget they just passed," Blagojevich spokeswoman Abby Ottenhoff said.

There are political downsides in an election year, including a further tarnishing of the legislative process.

Rep. John Fritchey, a Blagojevich critic who has proposed investigating impeachment, is confident more special sessions themselves would not be a trigger but acknowledges they could be an avenue for pursuing the issue.

"Having the Legislature convened at a time where there may exist other grounds that may rise to the level of impeachable offenses may create conditions that are ripe for proceedings," Fritchey said.

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