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'Pay-to-play' ban is passed

State budget also sent to Blagojevich, but capital plan stalls

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SPRINGFIELD—Lawmakers teed off on embattled Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich on the final day of their spring session Saturday, reacting to pay-to-play allegations that have rocked his administration by approving broad restrictions on campaign donations—a measure the governor said didn't go far enough and would not commit to sign.

The vote by the Democratic-led House only served to elevate tensions when, hours later, Blagojevich walked onto the floor of the chamber in a last-ditch effort to lobby for a \$33 billion-plus public works construction plan passed by the Senate. But the governor's chief nemesis, House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago), led a successful effort to quash it.

Amid the tumult of deadline day, the General Assembly managed to almost quietly achieve its chief business—approving a new state spending plan for the budget year that begins July 1. The nearly \$60 billion election-year budget was backed by Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, despite an acknowledgment that revenues may not be enough to support it.

The move spared Democrats the embarrassment of a second straight overtime session that would have given Republicans some leverage, but put the pressure on Blagojevich to make politically unpopular cuts or veto it outright.

"I'll have an open mind about it," Blagojevich said. "Some people are saying it's out of balance. I can't imagine that it would be. The constitution's very clear that the legislature must pass a balanced budget. It's a constitutional requirement."

Blagojevich provided a constant theme for the day as the House voted 114-0 to give final approval to a Senate-backed measure directly aimed at the governor and his record-breaking fundraising prowess by seeking to change a political culture where major campaign donations long have gone hand-in-hand with lucrative state contracts or other favors.



The vote came as jurors are deliberating the fate of Blagojevich fundraiser and adviser [Antoin "Tony" Rezko](#) on federal corruption charges after a trial in which convicted political insiders testified the governor spoke of rewarding contributors with state jobs and contracts. Blagojevich has not been charged with any wrongdoing.

Despite the Democratic governor's denials, members of his own political party singled him out as the reason Illinois' almost-everything-goes system of campaign financing needed to be reined in. The centerpiece of the measure would bar people who have or are seeking major state contracts from making political contributions to the statewide politicians who dole out the business.

"Plain and simple, it's a sad but true statement that, in Illinois, pay-to-play politics is perhaps one of the most pressing issues on our plate," said Rep. John Fritchey, the bill's sponsor. Fritchey cited a Tribune review of Blagojevich campaign contributions that showed the governor received 235 contributions of exactly \$25,000 and that most donors received something from the administration, ranging from appointments to contracts to favorable policy decisions.

"Let me be very clear: We are not under investigation. We do not award contracts. We have not been accused of doling out contracts for state contributors," Fritchey said.

Despite the criticism, Blagojevich attempted to spin the bill's passage as a positive, asking, "What took them so long?"

"I am looking forward to, with great enthusiasm, acting in a very positive way on that bill," Blagojevich said. "But I will say there's a lot more work to do on that issue. In fact there's significant things that I think we can do and hopefully move that process forward."

The legislation does not restrict contributions to lawmakers, critics noted, and may leave a loophole that would let the governor or others circumvent the restrictions.

Blagojevich would not say whether he would sign the bill, use his amendatory veto power to write changes into the legislation or veto it outright.

But supporters of the measure questioned Blagojevich's motives in making any changes to the bill, which would sent it back to the legislature, and promised to override them.

Blagojevich's spending priorities were mostly ignored by his fellow Democrats, but he said he would keep an "open mind" about signing the budget.

Sen. Donne Trotter (D-Chicago) defended the fiscal plans he helped craft as "responsible." But Democrats broadly conceded Blagojevich may need to use his veto pen to reduce the spending.

Sen. Christine Radogno (R-Lemont) called the budget out of whack, potentially by billions of dollars. House Minority Leader Tom Cross (R-Oswego) called the budget a reckless and "totally irresponsible approach to governing."

The spending plan would boost Illinois school funding by \$515 million, including \$148.5 million for Chicago, Joliet, Winfield and 23 other districts waiting for construction funds promised by the state six years ago.

The budget includes money to give lawmakers, judges and statewide officials a 3.8 percent cost-of-living pay raise.

But it does not include the money for a much larger increase that could be approved this year.

Lawmakers also debated until the final hours of their session a broad capital spending plan to pay for construction projects statewide.

Before adjourning, the Senate sent the House a plan that would be supported largely by a major expansion of gambling—including opening a land-based Chicago casino, installing slot machines at racetracks and leasing most of the Illinois Lottery.

Senate President Emil Jones (D-Chicago), long a Blagojevich ally, joined Republicans in passing the sweeping plan Saturday, but the proposal stalled in the House.

Blagojevich set the stage for more Democratic warfare by urging the House to vote on the construction program and gambling package before legislators "go home for the summer."

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