



Jim Broadway's Illinois School Policy Updates

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Policy by civic engagement: Cop-out, or rare opportunity?

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, State School News Service

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How important is [HB 2240](#), a bill that gives citizens a role in solving the state's black-hole fiscal crisis?

From the moment legislators pass any bill, the Constitution allows it 90 days to become law: 30 days for it to be delivered to the governor, and 60 days for him to sign it into law. Often, a bill takes nearly the full 90 days. HB 2240 made the journey in just a few hours on Thursday.

The reason why this bill is unique – as we suggested yesterday – has begun to emerge in [media analysis](#). That reason is found in the final paragraph of [the bill's text](#):

"Between February 24, 2010 and March 10, 2010, the members of the General Assembly and members of the public may make written budget recommendations to the Governor, and the Governor shall promptly make those recommendations available to the public through the Governor's Internet website."

Clearly, how citizens respond to this invitation – *or fail to respond* – will guide Illinois' fiscal future.

Not in recent memory – probably never before in history – have the citizens of Illinois been invited by the words of a state law to participate in solving such an intractable crisis as the FY 2011 budget, to give the policymakers their views in such a direct and transparent way. What is going on here?

Will the policymakers care what we think? Is this some kind of political strategy? Is this, as a reader who responded to yesterday's commentary suggested, a "cop-out" on the part of the legislative leaders?

The answer is yes, in my view, yes to all three questions.

Briefly, all legislators know a tax increase is necessary to balance the FY 2011 budget and start to dig the state out of its massive accumulated debt. But Republicans wanted to force the Democrats to raise taxes on their own – or not to raise taxes and let the state flounder – either way is a GOP political advantage.

HB 2240 is Senate President John Cullerton's way of reversing the political risk. It's very clever.

GOP spin has been that we can "cut our way out" of the impending \$13 billion deficit. But they don't say how. They don't say what to cut. HB 2240 invites them to put their plan on the public record, in letters to Gov. Pat Quinn to be posted on Quinn's web site (www.budget.illinois.gov).

It is unlikely many Republicans will fall into the trap. Every proposal to slash funding has a political cost. They probably will stick to their talking points without providing much detail or substance.

What about the citizens? How should we respond to the invitation extended to us HB 2240?

The bill sets up a dynamic situation, a letter-writing campaign "competition" between those favoring a tax increase and those who oppose it. That is the crux of it. Sure, their motives are political, but boxed in by their own dysfunction the policymakers have taken a desperate turn – in the direction of democracy.

I have some advice for you. I would not tell you which side to take. That is up to you. But you should know that if advocates for your position do not respond, the "other side" will win the contest. You have no choice, really. You must respond. But some ways of responding are better than others.

Here are some points we all might do well to consider.

Your letter will be posted on the governor's web site, perhaps even archived there for many years. This is, after all, an unprecedented historical event, perhaps even a model for resolving gridlock in the future. You will want to write something you will be proud to show your children and grandchildren.

Eschew the negative – anger, name-calling, recrimination, blame. Assume the intellectual honesty of all who disagree with you. Do not equate them with evil. Ugliness not only fosters gridlock in the near term but it also endures forever in archived public documents.

Think for yourself. Don't sign one of those cheesy form letters that many organizations are sure to crank out. Sure, it's an easy way to stuff the ballot box, but is that how you see yourself? Just state a position and then add a sentence or two of rationale, in your own words.

Keep to the subject. This is about the budget, about what programs and services the state provides and how it raises the money to pay for them. You may think term limits are a great idea, but that's not what this legislation is all about. Let the politicians express mindless partisanship – that's what got us here.

This is not a dissertation. The letters will be put in two stacks – for a tax hike, against taxes – and then will be weighed. A clear majority view on that question is the goal. You don't need to go much beyond that. Use your attitude about a particular program or two to illustrate your rationale, but keep it brief.

Identify yourself. I'd like to think that advice would be unnecessary, given the high integrity of those who read SSNS updates, but in this age of idiotic Internet anonymity one can never be sure. If you want your "vote" to count, you do not want to give anyone a reason to toss it in the trash.

Follow the law. Remember that the statute invites your input "between February 24, 2010 and March 10, 2010." That is because the governor will post the FY 2010-11 fiscal data on his web site no later than February 24. The assumption is that your response will be "informed" by that report. Would your letter be discarded if it arrives before February 24? Perhaps not, but why take the chance?

Send it to the Governor: Since yesterday, some folks have been sending their ideas to me. The ideas are pretty good, but there's nothing I can do about anything. Wait until February 24 and then send a crisp and clear position on the budget crisis to: **Gov. Pat Quinn, 207 State House, Springfield, IL 62706.**

Try to feel positively about this historic opportunity for meaningful civic engagement.

Sure, it arises from years of dysfunction and appears to be a political tactic. But the fact is, for those of us who have long lamented that state officials "don't seem to care what the people think," we finally are being asked our opinions – in statutory language – on an issue with effects that will extend for decades.

Perhaps "your side" will prevail. You'll be able to look back on the role you played with pride. Perhaps this experiment with democracy will become a model for the resolution of severe gridlock in the future. You'll feel your civic spirit has been renewed by having been a part of it.

Perhaps the idea is a dud. Perhaps instead of evoking a hundred thousand citizens' opinion, HB 2240 just draws the usual mindless gripes of bloggers with not much going on in their lives. That would be too bad but it is possible. But the Super Bowl is over and March Madness hasn't even begun. Take the time.

If you feel thoughts such as these are worth sharing, please forward this message to other individuals or organizations that may benefit from it. And you may have some ideas in this regard to share with others who read SSNS updates. Send them along and I'll share them in future messages.

Meanwhile, think about a letter to Quinn on February 24. History doesn't come calling very often.

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