



Jim Broadway's
Illinois School Policy Updates

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Why Madigan can't allow a tax hike vote

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, State School News Service

May 13, 2010 – Readers are frustrated with the House. If there's going to be a tax increase to solve the state budget crisis, why does it have to wait until January? Why must so many – educators, seniors, the physically and mentally ill, the jobless and the homeless – suffer through 2010?

House Speaker Michael Madigan seems to be the barrier. Is he an ogre? Is he insensitive to the plight of vulnerable citizens? Is he driven solely by politics and the November 2 elections? Is Madigan devoid of principles and compassion? Anger is on the rise.

I'll tell you what I think. But be aware, analysis is cold. Mine is based on more than a quarter-century of Madigan-watching. I don't claim the ability to read the Speaker's mind, but I can parse his statements. He usually reveals little, and he will spin a bit, but he does not lie.

And, yes, he does have compassion and is principled.

We will not start from scratch. We will begin with a few premises. If they are valid, I think we can come to a better understanding of this horrendous situation.

First premise: General taxes will be raised. Every objective observer agrees. State spending is close to the bone, but it is billions beyond what our nation's-lowest income tax rates and narrowest sales tax base can cover. The annual structural deficit must be tamed.

Second premise: Before taxes can be raised the general public must agree. This is a basic description of democracy. The people, as Madigan has said, "are not ready for tax increases." Sure, those of us who care about schools and human services are ready. But the general public is not.

Third premise: Preparing the public for a tax increase is a process, not an event. It will take time. It will require "proof" that the public cannot deny or refute. It will require motivating the public to accept it that tax increases – and nothing else – will restore the state's fiscal health.

So, what kind of process are we talking about here?

I see two major dynamics at work. The first, of course, is the effects of governmental inadequacy - the above-mentioned pain – that will play out this summer and fall. The public needs proof of the need. This may seem cruel. Have you read any blogs lately? *The public is cruel.*

The public also needs to feel the policymakers have done all they can, that all the "waste" has been rooted out. The second dynamic – the Sunshine Commission established in [HB 4836](#) – is intended to meet that need, to satisfy the public's demand for this kind of proof.

The commission will be established by June or so. It will have six months to develop a list of programs and services that the state can cut. There are hundreds of them. Total savings may exceed \$100 million. This won't make a dent in the deficit, of course, but it will be impressive.

What will keep the commission from cutting vital programs? It will have to be careful. Its report must be accepted entirely – or totally rejected – in single floor votes in the House and Senate. If their report includes items too controversial, all their work will have been for nothing.

Fast-forward to early January. By then, sad stories of personal pain linked directly to the state fiscal crisis will have driven local headlines for months. The Sunshine Commission will have reported the need to slash or zero out hundreds of state budget line items.

By then, the November elections will have either secured the political future of most legislators, or will have created a lot of “lame ducks” with nothing to lose on any vote. By then, the need for three-fifths majority votes will have expired; 60 votes will do the job.

The time for HB 174, or something very much like it, will have arrived.

Now, I know what you’re thinking. Why should the schools and the senior citizens and all the vulnerable citizens go through so much pain just for the political security of the legislators? After all, they caused this crisis with their pandering and smoke-and-mirrors budgets.

That is so true. But it doesn’t get us across the finish line.

If Madigan allowed a vote on HB 174 this month, it might pass. But it easily might be repealed before it could have much effect. Republican candidates would sign onto that in a “Contract with Illinois.” They would swarm to victory in November and repeal the bill in January.

If Madigan allowed HB 174 to pass this month, Sen. Bill Brady would surely be elected governor. He would sign the repeal into law. We would be back where we are now, but with no workable plan.

As to blame, you can trace the roots of this crisis pretty far back in time.

You can trace it to Big Jim Thompson, governor for 14 years. He treated the pension systems like a slush fund and, as a seasoned veteran, advised governors of other states to do the same.

You can trace it to George Ryan, who slashed the revenue base by \$1.3 billion one year to benefit his corporate sponsors and, to a lesser extent, parents of private school students.

You can trace it back to Rod Blagojevich, the panderer for all time. He took office just as the structural deficit became serious – and he made sure it became an intractable crisis.

You can trace it back to Ronald Reagan, who convinced the public that government is their enemy.

Let’s parse Madigan’s words a bit. In recent years he responded to the call for tax increases by saying, “support for that is lacking in my caucus.” This year he says that “the people aren’t ready.” This seems to suggest sufficient support has materialized in his caucus.

If so, convincing the public is all that remains.

A final word about Madigan: He should bring his career to a graceful conclusion as soon as possible.

He cannot be held blameless for the current mess. Sure, Blagojevich was the proximate cause of most of it, but Madigan made sure Blagojevich was unobstructed in his bid for reelection. The Speaker does not flat lie, but he withholds a lot of relevant truths. That’s similar to lying.

More seriously, he’s lost his way. In his youth, a state political party existed just to provide a good brand name for its candidates. He’s twisted the party’s mission into one of controlling the candidates, their campaigns and their public service after they get elected.

Finally, using his influence to get children of friends and political supporters admitted to the University of Illinois illustrates an astounding lack of ethics. For him to say, as he has, that he would do the same favor for anyone regardless of party affiliation is just pathetic.

Yes, Madigan has principles, but he also has ethical blind spots that seem to grow every year. He should bow out before he crosses the Dan Rostenkowski Line.

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