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**Ex-IDOT chief: Pin clout on Quinn;**

**State inspector finds 'countless' jobs went to political hires**

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Staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD - Gov. Pat Quinn's former transportation secretary has accused the governor's office of pushing "the vast majority" of questionable political hires in her agency even though an inspector general Friday refused to tie any blame to Quinn.

The report by state Executive Inspector General Ricardo Meza - and specifically the charge from former Transportation Secretary Ann Schneider - triggered new trouble for the governor in his re-election bid, even though Meza found no direct evidence to support Schneider's accusation.

Quinn's Republican opponent, Bruce Rauner, quickly seized on the report and accused the governor of failing to rein in patronage.

A report by Meza released Friday alleged that "countless" legitimate job applicants for Illinois Department of Transportation jobs were sidestepped by hundreds of political appointees installed in jobs for which politics weren't supposed to play a role.

Over a 10-year period, the report said, 255 people were hired as IDOT "staff assistants," with job descriptions that made them exempt from a competitive, merit-based hiring process. But the "majority" later wound up doing jobs that should have been competitively filled, including operating a switchboard, planting trees and inventorying furniture, Meza said.

In fact, Meza said, 85 "staff assistants" admitted they were performing functions not in their original job descriptions. At least one was paid $20,000 more than a competitively hired person whose function he was actually performing, Meza said.

Meza said IDOT officials "circumvented" the process governing political versus merit-based hires, but their actions constituted only a "violation of administrative orders." He said he had not forwarded his report to any law enforcement agency.

His report centered on four former IDOT employees, including two former heads of the sprawling state bureaucracy, for presiding over the allegedly improper hiring scheme but largely was silent on the governor's office playing a direct role.

However, in an attached rebuttal to Meza's report, Schneider pointed the finger at the governor's office.

"It is my recollection that [the] vast majority of Rutan-exempt [political] hires were chosen from those recommended to me or my staff by the governor's office," Schneider said, referring to the landmark Rutan U.S. Supreme Court opinion that put limits on political hiring.

"The governor's office would have been provided resumes of all such candidates and would have requested that we complete the process of having the recommended person approved for the open position," she said.

Schneider - who resigned June 30, more than two weeks after Quinn's office received Meza's report - went on to say she felt unable to turn away any recommended hires pushed by Quinn's office.

"Neither I nor my staff were in a position to reject the recommended individuals for these exempt positions as no additional interview process was required," she said in her Aug. 15 rebuttal.

Meza outlined how the hiring of so-called staff assistant positions, jobs where politics shouldn't have entered the picture but seemingly did, spiked at IDOT under Quinn. In 2011, the second year of his governorship, 104 of those positions existed in the agency, exactly double the number that the agency had in 2008, the last full year of Rod Blagojevich's governorship.

"While the full extent and impact of IDOT's misuse of the staff assistant position may never be known, the duration and pervasiveness of IDOT's improper acts have undoubtedly denied countless qualified candidates the opportunity to lawfully obtain state employment on the basis of merit," Meza wrote.

At a news conference Friday, Meza said his investigators did not find Quinn had personally recommended anyone who got a staff assistant job, although some staff assistants may have worked in the governor's office at one point.

"We found that none [of the staff assistant hires] were directly attributable to Quinn," Meza said.

In addition, the inspector general said, although the governor's office must approve all political state hires, chiefs of staff in the governor's office indicated they had no idea that people they cleared for hiring as staff assistants would not be functioning as staff assistants.

In response to Schneider, Quinn's office Friday afternoon acknowledged it had recommended IDOT hire some job candidates, but only for Rutan-exempt policy-making jobs where politics could be a consideration.

"From time to time, the governor's office provides potential job candidates for consideration for open, Rutan-exempt positions," Quinn spokesman Grant Klinzman told Early & Often, the Sun-Times' political portal. "The governor's office's expectation and understanding is, has been, and always will be that any candidate who is ultimately hired is doing the work of the position that candidate is filling. We expect employees in Rutan-exempt positions to be doing Rutan-exempt work."