

June 5, 2013 Wednesday

**Unreachable on pensions; Phoneless Madigan is no-show at gov's special meeting**

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As the state's pension crisis went into overtime, Illinoisans already facing a bond-rating downgrade could expect to find little relief from their leaders anytime soon if Tuesday was any litmus test on political progress.

On Tuesday, Gov. Pat Quinn revealed that he was scrambling to get hold of Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan, who was a no-show for a pension meeting with the governor and Illinois Senate President John Cullerton.

A busy signal would have been good news.

Instead, Quinn said that Madigan, who is out of state, doesn't even carry a cellphone, leaving the governor to trade messages with Madigan's wife in an effort to get the speaker plugged into a meeting via phone.

Quinn called a meeting of state leaders on Tuesday to deal with the state's fiscal "emergency" a day after Illinois' bond rating was downgraded because of Springfield's inaction on pension reform.

"I think it is an emergency. I think time is of the essence," Quinn said.

"Well, it's his choice he doesn't have a cellphone. I did leave a message with his wife, who called me and I returned her call," Quinn said. "So I haven't heard from either of them but, uh, I know Mike Madigan and he will come, forward, hopefully soon, because we have to work on it."

Meanwhile, Madigan's staff engaged in its own version of "Where's Waldo" on Tuesday about where exactly the speaker was. On 11 separate occasions during an interview, a Madigan aide offered the Chicago Sun-Times the same secretive response when asked to explain his boss' absence Tuesday: "He was not available."

The identical refrain was offered over and over and over to these and other questions about Madigan's whereabouts: Was the speaker on vacation? Was he on a business trip? Was he somewhere in Chicago? Did he have a medical problem and need to see a doctor? Was he in Palm Springs, Calif., where he has been known to enjoy a round of golf?

"He was not available. So what's the next question?" spokesman Steve Brown answered at one point during the cat-and-mouse, question-and-answer session. Pressed on why he gave the same nondescript answer, Brown said, "I don't know there's any secrecy. I just think that's the appropriate answer."

Playing hooky from such meetings isn't unusual in the Madigan playbook. He often frustrated ex-Gov. Rod Blagojevich and his staff by not showing up at meetings to talk about budget issues or a statewide construction program in his Statehouse office. Three of the four legislative leaders typically would appear, but a chair for the speaker would remain empty in a sign of how deeply the two men disliked each other.

Leading up to Friday's anti-climactic ending of the spring legislative session, it was also a rarity for Quinn, Cullerton and Madigan to sit together in the same room, though they all engaged in shuttle diplomacy individually.

Madigan has amassed so much power, he answers to few people. Catching him in the hallway in the state Capitol and extracting a comment is considered breaking news.

"His public approval rating isn't something that motivates or explains a lot of his behavior," said Springfield political and policy expert Kent Redfield. "If the speaker chose to absent himself, that's an indication that he thinks he has the better hand and that time's on his side. I think there's no reason to get together if you don't have a plan. Right now, Madigan's plan, I believe, is that the Senate is going to have to come to him and that time's on his side. He feels he's got the bill that most of the editorial boards favor and more favorably received by the bond houses."

Don Rose, another longtime political observer, said he believes Madigan finds himself in a unique position. Madigan had come up with a pension-reform solution that was gaining strong editorial support. If it passed, it would have made him the "savior" and the praise would hopefully reflect well on his daughter, Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, as she looks toward a possible run for governor.

"I think he's befuddled that he couldn't get Cullerton to go along," Rose said. "He's never to my recollection faced a situation like this - where he had the answer and a presumption that eventually Cullerton would come his way" but he didn't.

If Madigan emerged publicly now without a solution, the blame for a stalemate could fall on him, Rose said.

"This is where he has to be very, very cautious," Rose said. "There is this constant apparition before him of how it's going to hit Lisa [Madigan]."

As for Tuesday's no-show, Brown said Quinn's staff "knew [Madigan] wasn't available."

"Why they felt the need to announce a meeting when they knew he wasn't available, it's beyond me," Brown said. "I'm not a psychiatrist, so I can't explain why they do what they do."

When the state's bond rating was downgraded Monday, Quinn's office reached out to both Madigan and Cullerton to set up a meeting.

Quinn said he was prepared to call a special session but he first wanted a meeting of the minds and to reach an agreement with leaders beforehand.

"I think it's important for the speaker of the House to come to the realization that working with his counterpart in the Senate is the way to go to get comprehensive pension reform for our state," Quinn said. "We can do this. The key is for the Legislature to do its job. I'm ready to do my job and that's to sign the bill into law."

Quinn wouldn't take the bait when asked if he was frustrated by the lack of communication with Madigan.

"No, I'm never frustrated. I'm focused," Quinn said. "And my focus is on getting this reform adopted. It's very, very important to the future of Illinois."

Quinn said he was not going to back down.

"I'm going to keep pushing and pushing and pushing legislators - including the leaders - to do the right thing. That's what I do, I believe in doing hard things because that's what the people want. If it's the right thing to do, even if it's hard, get it done."