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**'IDIOTS';**

**Pension session goes nowhere**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD - Gov. Pat Quinn's special legislative session to deal with Illinois' great public-pension crisis wound up not being very special at all.

Quinn once raised expectations that the state's pension puzzle could be solved Friday "once and for all," but only one sharply limited bill surfaced - a plan abolishing pensions for state legislators and other state officeholders.

And there weren't even enough votes to pass that.

"We all look like idiots," said Rep. Daniel Biss (D-Evanston), who nonetheless voted for it.

The legislation House Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie (D-Chicago) brought to the House floor applied only to the smallest of the state's five retirement systems and would have eaten into Illinois' $83 billion pension debt by a mere $111 million over the next 33 years.

"Let's start with ourselves," she said, describing her measure as only a "first step" toward the massive overhaul needed to right what is regarded as the most underfunded state pension system in the country.

"If we can't do pension reform for the General Assembly Retirement System, who back at home will think there's a chance in the world we'll do anything more?" she asked.

Her plan would have forced retired lawmakers to give up annual 3 percent pension bumps if they wanted to keep their state-subsidized health insurance.

After next year, pensions would be abolished for newly elected lawmakers.

That plan emerged only after Quinn and the four legislative leaders failed during an earlier, closed-door meeting Friday to agree on a broader solution that would have applied to more of the state's five pension systems - including a Senate-passed plan covering state workers and lawmakers that House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) had said earlier would be called for a vote.

But the votes weren't there for that plan or anything else.

Currie's proposal wasn't even called for a final vote after a 54-53 test vote showed it well short of the necessary 60 votes needed to pass the House. The Senate packed up and went home even before the House had finished debating Currie's bill, giving the sense that its fate had been preordained by Democrats, who hold comfortable majorities in both chambers of the Statehouse.

Republicans mostly stayed off Currie's legislation, complaining it did nothing to solve the state's pension mess and was meant as little more than an election-year poison pill devised by Madigan.

The roll call clearly can be used to portray GOP candidates in election-year mailers as preserving their own generous pensions while the rest of the state's pension systems burn and pose a daily threat to Illinois' creditworthiness.

"What happened here is an orchestrated chaos to make sure nothing happens," said Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno (R-Lemont), who with House Minority Leader Tom Cross (R-Oswego) tore into Quinn for not putting the brakes on Madigan's push.

"It's a catastrophic failure of leadership," she said.

Despite laying a goose egg with his big plans to bring lawmakers together to fix pensions, Quinn shot blame right back at Republicans for torpedoing anything meaningful and laboring to protect "the pension system for the politicians."

"What we saw today is the Republican leaders sabotage each and every effort to reform the public pension systems, whether it be four systems, three systems, two systems or even their own system," Quinn told reporters after the House and Senate left the Capitol with nothing to show for their effort.

"I think there's a lot of explaining to do to the voters and taxpayers back home."

In his floor speech, Biss, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology-educated mathematician, aptly summed up how many voters and taxpayers probably feel after Friday's wasted effort.

With no solution in sight to the pension debacle of 2012, everyone under the Capitol dome has a role in "a traveling freak show of people yelling at one another on all sides," Biss said.