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**Quinn far short of 60 tax-rate votes**

By Dave McKinney and Natasha Korecki

Staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD - Gov. Pat Quinn spent more than 2½ hours inside the belly of the political beast Monday, but he left the lengthy, closed-door meeting with House Democrats still far short of the votes necessary to permanently extend the 2011 income tax hike.

Facing universal GOP opposition to his plan, Quinn appeared before the 71-member House Democratic caucus armed with a copy of the state constitution to emphasize the state's role as the primary funder of public schools in Illinois and what could be hit first if tax rates drop in January.

Yet it was clear that even after Quinn warned of grim financial consequences if the tax extension fails, he has a long way to go before lining up the 60 House votes he needs to get the measure passed to the Senate before a scheduled May 31 legislative adjournment.

"I think my philosophy in life is hope for the best and work for it. So we're working real hard on getting those 60 votes in this House of Representatives," the governor told reporters outside a Statehouse committee room. "Obviously, we have to keep on working until we get there."

House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, offered a more blunt assessment of the mood among his members after hearing Quinn describe the doomsday scenario that exists if income-tax rates are allowed to drop in January, as scheduled.

"We are significantly away from 60 today, and I'm going to continue to work to find 60 Democrats to pass the governor's bill," the speaker said.

"I thought he did an excellent job of presenting his position, arguing for his position, taking questions. He took every question. He answered every question," Madigan said when asked to sum up his takeaway from the rare meeting between the governor and House Democrats.

"He got very animated in a lot of his answers because at times, he wasn't hearing what he wanted to hear," Madigan continued. "I think it's significant there was opposition expressed from all sectors of our caucus."

Unless lawmakers act, the 5 percent income tax rate for individuals and the 7 percent rate for corporations will drop in January to 3.75 percent and 5.25 percent, respectively. If that happens, the state faces an estimated $4 billion revenue shortfall in the fiscal year that begins July 1.

Enough support appears to exist within the Democratic-controlled Senate to block the tax rates from falling, making the real battleground the House, where members worry about harsh fallout from voters in the Nov. 4 elections.

Monday's meeting between the governor and his erstwhile House Democratic allies came after he endured another withering day of being beaten up by Republican gubernatorial rival Bruce Rauner, who labeled Quinn a "tax-and-spend" politician and failed leader who can't move Democratic supermajorities in the House and Senate to do his bidding.

"They're playing political games and showing a lack of leadership and unfortunately in Springfield, that's been the status quo," Rauner said after a campaign event in Northbrook.

"Right now, they're trying to portray themselves as just doing whatever the voters want. They're saying voters like more spending so we're gonna give them more spending. Voters don't like taxes so we're just not going to vote on taxes," Rauner charged.

"That's political gamesmanship. That's playing political football with our financial health. It's a huge mistake. It's a failure of leadership. It's a failure of the General Assembly and the governor down there," Rauner said.

But Quinn returned fire at Rauner, dismissing him for embracing a "radical, extreme" budgetary philosophy, even though he has not served up a specific financial blueprint that enables taxes to drop but safeguards schools, health care for the poor, and other vital programs upon which Illinoisans depend.

"Well, he has a scheme to raise property taxes in Illinois, and I don't think anybody in Illinois should listen to him when it comes to budgets," the governor said of his opponent. "He wants to raise our property taxes by starving our schools. That is a learn-less budget. We aren't going that way."

Madigan lobbed a verbal stinger at Rauner when asked about the GOP mantra often heard that higher taxes embraced by Democrats are making Illinois businesses and families flee the state.

"People are leaving," Madigan quipped, "because they're looking at the prospect of Rauner as governor."

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McKinney and Dismer reported from Springfield while Korecki reported from Northbrook.