

Legislators Tackle Local Issues in Forum

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Newly elected Cook County Board President Todd Stroger's proposed budget contains a "nuclear option," imploding programs ranging from health care to criminal justice that serve local communities, Commissioner Lawrence Suffredin, D-13th, said Friday.

Speaking at a special legislative forum at the Hotel Orrington in Evanston, Suffredin sketched out possible implications of Stroger's budget. Stroger has pledged to make \$500 million in cuts to erase a deficit without raising taxes.

Stroger is "either the greatest politician in the state or the dumbest political official to ever come forward," Suffredin told his audience.

Suffredin, an attorney, said the proposed budget "is basically a nuclear option. It takes the system down to zero."

"I frankly think we may not prosecute misdemeanors if this budget passes," he said.

Stroger's proposed budget calls for cuts in public defenders, prosecutors and special police services -- such as a canine unit and an evidence gathering team that communities use, Suffredin said.

He said Stroger has said when he's done with his proposed budget, he'll give commissioners a chance to make their changes.

"I'm taking him at his word," Suffredin said.

Other Evanston lawmakers at the breakfast also sounded cautionary notes about what new legislative sessions might bring.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, was the most optimistic, however. Schakowsky is now part of a new majority in the U.S. House.

Bipartisan legislation

The new House majority quickly put its stamp on legislation, approving new clean-air measures, an increase in the minimum wage, expanded student loans and other proposals -- all within 100 hours of taking control.

"We did it with bipartisan support. There were 124 Republicans who voted with us on an energy bill and 82 on the minimum wage," she said.

She said the 100 hours of activity are viewed as a "down payment on a more comprehensive approach that we're going to take to each and every one of these issues."

State Sen. Jeffrey Schoenberg, D-9th, and state Reps. Elizabeth Coulson, R-17th, and Julie

Hamos, D-18th, spoke of the shadow that the state's unfunded pension liabilities casts over future efforts.

Schoenberg, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said the pension is a "mess" that only now is being addressed.

The issue is the "boulder on the path up the mountain top" to any efforts at school reform, and "we have to move it aside," he said.

Hamos said legislators' budget priorities are based on new revenue growth. She said new revenue growth is pegged at \$900 million for the next year.

"Our new pension obligation this year is \$700 million, which leaves no money for schools, our big programs or anything," Hamos said, "so it's not possible to ignore our big problems."

Coulson, the lone Republican at Friday's session -- "We think of her as a Democrat," quipped Suffredin -- said issues such as the state's unfunded pension liability transcend partisan politics.

Unsure about the future

Nevertheless, with key legislative leaders espousing different approaches to the problem, "I'm not as hopeful as I thought I'd be after the November election" about an immediate solution, she said.

On the other hand, Coulson, a moderate Republican, said, "I'm very excited about what's happening in Washington."

The Chamber of Commerce forum called for a different format. Following their legislative previews, the lawmakers presided over small groups in sessions that addressed single topics, such as energy conservation legislation and transportation needs.

Schakowsky talked about alternative fuel sources such as ethanol, "which is very good for our region, focusing on the Midwest, not the Mideast, which I like."

In another room, Hamos, a highly regarded policy analyst before she was elected to office, presented a primer on future moves she is considering to create an integrated transportation system in the Chicago region.

Hamos, who heads up a state committee on mass transit, was one of the first legislators to call for a universal fare card system.

Her next move, she said, will be to place the Regional Transportation Authority in a leading role in coordinating various transit agencies, including the Chicago Transit Authority and Metra.

Currently, "you have basically three transit agencies that operate on their own," Hamos told members of her group.