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Governor rips Madigan as budget mess drags on

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SPRINGFIELD -- Gov. Rod Blagojevich and Democrats who control the House met behind closed doors for more than 2 1/2 hours Monday but failed to agree on a budget plan, extending a dispute that pits lawmakers' desires to address existing state needs against the governor's plans for a massive new health-care program.

The Democratic governor emerged from the meeting and lashed out at House Speaker Michael Madigan of Chicago and his Democratic members, suggesting that it will be their fault if an agreement cannot be worked out before the General Assembly's scheduled May 31 adjournment deadline.

"What's lacking in this discussion is that unless and until the House Democrats and Speaker Madigan come up with their proposal, tell us what they can support, what they can't support, what they're for and what they're not for, it's going to be very difficult to finish this on time," Blagojevich said.

In the meeting, Blagojevich insisted upon his plans for large-scale expansion of state-subsidized health care as well as a new influx of money for the state's public schools. But some House Democrats said their priority for any new revenues would first go to education rather than health care.

"I don't think this caucus or him coming down got us any closer," said Rep. Robert Molaro (D-Chicago). "This is going to be a very, very tough three to four days" toward the adjournment deadline. After Thursday, completing a new state spending plan becomes tremendously more difficult because it will require at least some Republicans to support a plan in order to pass it.

One House Democrat who asked not to be identified said his colleagues were being surveyed on how many of the dozens of existing business tax breaks they would be willing to end in an effort to generate new revenues.

Blagojevich made clear he had moved beyond his initial revenue-generating proposal, a \$7 billion tax on the gross receipts of businesses, which was overwhelmingly rejected by the House on a 107-0 vote earlier in the month.

At the same time, the governor continued his vow to oppose any increase in income and sales taxes, which lawmakers said would be the only clear alternative to raise the kind of revenues he wants to support his health care and education initiatives.

Blagojevich has expressed support for a gambling-expansion plan backed by Senate President Emil Jones (D-Chicago) that would call for four new casinos, including some for Chicago. But gambling proposals of the size that Jones is pushing have failed under their own weight in the past.

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