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Long shut out of game, Republicans now players

Meet Tom Cross, House GOP leader. He just got a seat at the negotiating table.

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SPRINGFIELD -- House Republican leader Tom Cross will enter budget negotiations Tuesday facing Democrats who didn't want him in the room, and he will carry the agenda of a party that has been entirely shut out of the last two state spending plans.

But what Cross wants matters now because the Democrats who control the House, Senate and governor's office blew their end-of-May deadline for passing a budget. That means Republican votes are needed to pass anything in the House.

The GOP wish list that Cross carries is most heavily focused on what Republicans don't want. His top concerns are blocking tax hike proposals and resisting expensive new programs like Gov. Rod Blagojevich's health-care initiative.

"We've got to make sure that we're paying for the old existing programs," Cross said. "I don't think people want to start new programs."

House Republicans get their rare spot at the negotiating table because at least five of them are needed to reach 71 votes, the three-fifths majority now required in the 118-member House to send a spending plan to the governor because of last week's missed deadline.

That makes Cross, of Oswego, the de facto Republican leader in a state where the GOP -- racked by dissension between social moderates and conservatives -- has become all but irrelevant to the Democrats' one-party dominance of the legislature and all statewide elected offices. Cross, a protege of former U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), has sought to walk that fine line. But in his new position, he will find it hard to avoid criticism over any compromise with Democrats.

Cross and his Republican caucus have already outlined the framework of a no-tax-hike budget. His policy positions may not bode well for Chicago-area mass transit gaining a new influx of operating money from the state or through a regional sales tax hike. He opposes the giant gambling expansion pushed by Blagojevich and Senate President Emil Jones (D-Chicago). He is a leading critic of stalled plans that would increase income and sales taxes and impose a tax on the generation of electricity. And he opposes the governor's now-dormant plan to create a new \$7 billion tax on business revenues.

New public works program

At the same time, Cross has expressed support for a new public works program for school and highway construction -- something that has not been accomplished since Blagojevich took office. Cross has supported adding more gambling positions to existing casinos to fund the construction program, in contrast to the proposal for new casinos in Chicago and the suburbs that Blagojevich and Jones have embraced.

It is questionable whether lawmakers and the governor will agree any time soon on a state budget to take effect July 1. Last

week, Blagojevich had publicly urged Democrats to move quickly on a budget so that Republicans couldn't get their hands in the negotiations, but to no avail.

On Monday, aides to the governor called for budget talks involving Democratic and Republican leaders to be held at the beginning of every week of the overtime session, starting Tuesday.

Deputy Gov. Sheila Nix said Blagojevich is willing "to compromise and be flexible." But she insisted he is not backing down from his demand for a massive health-care expansion or his campaign pledge against higher income or sales taxes. That puts him at odds with some fellow Democrats as well as the Republicans.

Blagojevich, criticized by lawmakers for not being involved in the legislative give-and-take, has yet to speak publicly since the legislature missed its scheduled adjournment on Thursday. He did not attend his aides' news conference.

The administration also had no apologies for Sen. Mike Jacobs (D-East Moline), who accused Blagojevich of threatening his political career in retaliation for not supporting the governor's health-care plan in the Senate because of its dependence on higher business taxes.

"The governor's extremely disappointed that Sen. Jacobs chose to vote against providing health care for working families in Illinois," Nix said.

Sensing the impending Democratic meltdown, Cross laid out a budget plan two weeks ago that calls for the state to "live within our means." It taps into the natural growth in state revenues from existing tax sources. It does not scale back public pension fund payments, as Democrats have done the last few years to pay for state operations, and it does not dip into funds earmarked for specific purposes, such as building roads, to pay for operating expenses.

With high gasoline prices, soaring electricity bills and a softening real-estate market, Cross said, the "last thing residents want to see is a tax increase by the General Assembly."

"I've got some basic principles, but we have a responsibility to balance the budget," Cross said. "We're not going to be radical about it. But we're also going to say, 'We've got a responsibility to working families in Illinois, and we've got to be responsive and respectful of what's going on in their lives.' "

The Republicans also hope to gain a voice in negotiations with utility companies to address electricity rates, which more than doubled in many areas in January, becoming the dominant issue of the legislative session for many Downstate lawmakers.

Limited gambling support

Cross has embraced a small form of gambling expansion to fund a \$5 billion construction program. House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) has already told Blagojevich and Jones that he lacks the votes among his Democrats to pass the more ambitious gambling expansion plan and is co-sponsoring with Cross a bill to add positions to existing casinos.

Madigan and Cross have had an off-and-on but respectful relationship. The last two years, Blagojevich, Madigan and Jones -- all Chicago Democrats -- cut Cross and Senate Minority Leader Frank Watson (R-Greenville) entirely out of the budget negotiations.

Though Senate Democrats' 37-22 edge means they have enough votes to meet the three-fifths supermajority requirement without Republican input, Watson also will have a seat at the bargaining table.

This session, before Republicans gained a voice in the process, Democrats were able to send Blagojevich a plan to raise \$300 million through the elimination of various corporate tax breaks. That might help fill the gap between Cross' plan to boost public school spending by \$200 million and a Madigan budget plan that called for about a \$400 million boost in school funding.

Now, with Tuesday's scheduled meeting of the four legislative leaders and Blagojevich, Cross said there was a real need to

"try to sort through what's out there."

"Maybe it's a wasted meeting," he said. "But I doubt it."

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