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Clock is ticking on governor's health and tax plans

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By Eric Krol

Daily Herald Political Writer

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To see what a rough road Gov. Rod Blagojevich's business-tax-for-health-care plan faces, look no further than Tuesday's pep rally with the AARP.

The nation's largest senior advocacy group endorsed the governor's proposal to help provide a majority of the state's 1.5 million uninsured obtain coverage. But AARP officials declined to back Blagojevich's gross receipts tax on businesses that would pay for the massive health-care expansion.

With just 30 days left to get his tax-and-spend plan approved by lawmakers, Blagojevich has yet to meet with fellow Democrat House Speaker Michael J. Madigan, according to a Madigan spokesman.

Even over in the Senate, where President Emil Jones Jr. remains a staunch ally, the closed-door talks have yet to begin in earnest. State Sen. Donne Trotter, a Chicago Democrat and Jones' lead budget negotiator, said he's not been involved in any talks about the governor's tax or health care plans.

"I don't have a clue," he said.

On Tuesday, Blagojevich indicated a willingness to negotiate on the details of his \$7 billion tax on businesses. Executives argue it'll kill job creation and get passed onto consumers. Blagojevich wants to start taxing businesses that have sales of \$2 million or more to pay for health insurance expansion, more money for schools and limited property-tax relief.

"I'm open to ideas and suggestions, but of course I'm totally opposed to raising taxes on people, so I'm not open to a income tax or sales tax increase," he said. "But if there's some ideas about making our GRT proposal a better proposal, we'd love to hear them."

After May 31, Republican votes would be required to approve both the tax increase and health-care plan, so Democrats have an incentive to avoid letting that happen.

At this point though, the indications are it'll be a long, hot summer in Springfield for the governor and lawmakers.

If so, it'll be a summer with higher electric rates still in place. Blagojevich said Tuesday he thinks a measure to roll back ComEd increases should be approved before lawmakers leave town. And the governor said he has been lobbying lawmakers on the issue.

But Blagojevich, whose governing style often leads to high-profile crusades, has not publicly turned up the pressure on ComEd or downstate utility Ameren so far to cut a deal.

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