

Bus tour promotes tax plan

Blagojevich makes stops at Avon farm, Peoria business

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AVON - He apologized for smelling like a hog farm and was called out as one of the only Republicans in the room, but Gregory Leigh was determined to make his point with Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

"The problem as we see it is our costs are going to go up by a significant amount when every supplier we have as a farmer would be in that category where they'll have significantly more taxes," said Leigh, who had maneuvered his way up to the governor in the crowded room of the rural farm house in Avon that Blagojevich visited Tuesday.

"There's no perfect solution here," Blagojevich responded. "If we had a perfect solution, we'd get rid of all of your taxes. That would be a given. We analyzed and looked at the fairest thing to do to provide health care and grow our economy and fund our schools."

Though Blagojevich has largely been selling his gross receipts tax plan to receptive audiences around the state as part of his four-day "Investing in Families" tour, the dialogue was indicative of the struggle the governor faces in peddling a program that will cost many businesses thousands more a year. Blagojevich's plan is to tax gross receipts on businesses with at least \$2 million in annual revenue, though the plan would exempt exports, food and medicine.

The revenue generated would fund a broad health insurance plan aimed at providing coverage to Illinois' 1.4 million uninsured, as well as provide breaks to individuals paying high premiums for personal insurance. Already, top Democrats, including Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn, have criticized the initiative.

But Denis Buchen, a livestock and grain farmer, thought it was a pretty good idea.

"I was just real glad they're trying to figure out a solution for the health problems here in Illinois," he said. "I think they're going to have to get real creative and think outside the norms to come up with a plan."

In Avon, Blagojevich visited the 1860s farm home that belongs to Buchen's parents, Mary Jane and Phil Buchen. Denis Buchen said he pays \$2,000 to \$3,000 a year for a private insurance plan that covers him and his daughter, and he's hoping for some relief.

"It was totally awesome," he said of the governor's visit.

Buchen said friends and family were invited in and hoped the governor wasn't upset a "few Republicans filtered in" with the mix.

Blagojevich seemed tickled by the experience, stepping on the bus at the event's end and proclaiming to his staff: "I was meant to be raised on a farm. Isn't this nice?" He also seemed delighted by his frank discussion with the room's Republican guest.

"I think this was a very good stop," he said.

Earlier in the day, Blagojevich also touted his plan in West Peoria at Linda Bachman's store, LPD

Uniforms, where he pitched his plan not as a tax increase, but a "tax fairness" issue.

"This is a fair way of providing help to families, working people and to give small and medium size businesses who can't afford fancy accountants and powerful lobbyists a level playing field with their competitors."

Blagojevich argues that large corporations have been skating through tax loopholes for years, leaving the burden on small businesses.

But Mary Ardapple, owner of Apple's Bakery in Peoria, said it's irresponsible for the governor to pit businesses of differing sizes against one another. She thinks the rhetoric will run employers out of the state and believes she will end up paying more as a small business owner because of costs passed on from large businesses trying to recoup their lost revenue.

"I just find it very distressful," she said. "I had a customer say to me today, 'Where has the statesmanship gone in our political process, where people are leading with their heart in the right place?' I'm not saying he doesn't think his heart is in the right place, but I think he's out of touch."

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