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Illinois Governor would OK more casinos to fund health plan

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — Gov. Rod Blagojevich on Monday said he doesn't want more casinos in Illinois, but is willing "to hold my nose" and agree to it if it pays for universal health care coverage.

Blagojevich led a long closed-door meeting Monday with contentious fellow Democrats who control the Illinois House, struggling to find consensus on a new \$50 billion to \$60 billion state spending plan in the next three days. Blagojevich is pushing for heavy new health care spending next year but is having trouble paying for it, after legislators this month killed his plan for a sweeping new business tax.

The replacement plan that has surfaced lately would raise revenue by adding four new Chicago-area riverboat casinos to Illinois' current fleet of nine, and allow existing boats like the Casino Queen and the Argosy at Alton to expand their capacity.

Another alternative would be to leave gambling — and state spending — right where it is, though Blagojevich remains adamantly opposed to that suggestion. He warned Monday that the "no-growth" budget favored by Republicans and many Democrats would roll back advances already made in pre-school funding, breast cancer screening and other areas.

Blagojevich in the past has said he generally opposed expanding gambling, which brings in millions of dollars to the state in the form of taxes on the privately owned casinos. But with several alternative fundraising methods shot down in recent weeks, the widening of gambling income (thus widening the state's take in taxes) has emerged as a funding mechanism of final resort.

"I don't like ... additional casinos, but I'm willing to hold my nose if it means health care for every citizen of our state," Blagojevich said.

If the Democratic-controlled Legislature doesn't pass a state budget by a Thursday adjournment deadline, a constitutional provision kicks in that gives the Republican minority a voice in the budget process. That would almost certainly mean a political showdown in Springfield that could push the legislative session well into summer, and scuttle Blagojevich's social service agenda.

Blagojevich emphasized the importance of reaching a Democratic agreement this week "so that we don't empower the House Republicans," who generally oppose the increased spending Blagojevich is seeking.

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