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Hard feelings another hurdle for Blagojevich in Springfield

By **DEANNA BELLANDI**

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. - Gov. Rod Blagojevich joked about his frosty relations with lawmakers when he delivered his State of the State address, but those strained feelings are no laughing matter.

If the governor is going to find support for his budget proposal and legislative agenda, he'll have to win over lawmakers who are still angry over clashes that resulted in a record-breaking overtime session last year.

Early indicators are that it won't be easy.

Even a bystander in the dispute is taking shots at Blagojevich. State Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias, a fellow Democrat, called him the "anti-Obama." Where Barack Obama has a reputation as a coalition-builder, Blagojevich drives people apart, he said.

"Here in Illinois, we have someone who has been divisive, someone who has caused disagreements and confrontations within his own party, and we saw a complete lack of leadership last year," Giannoulias said.

Lawmakers' dissatisfaction was clear Wednesday from the anemic applause that greeted Blagojevich when he entered the House chamber to deliver his State of the State address. The clapping ended long before he finished making his way down the center aisle to the podium.

"I've never seen a governor receive such little respect and support as I saw this governor in this budget address _ from when he entered the building to when he left," Republican Sen. Bill Brady said.

Blagojevich made an obvious gesture to try to diffuse some of the ill will when he acknowledged the failure of his grandest proposal from last year _ the largest tax increase in state history to pay for programs to guarantee health care to everyone and overhaul education funding.

"I can tell you, I now have a better appreciation for that old Hank Williams song 'I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry.' Needless to say, I'm not asking you to do that again," Blagojevich joked, eliciting some of the biggest applause in his speech.

Legislators already are wondering whether the state can afford Blagojevich's latest proposals, the centerpiece of which is a \$1.2 billion economic stimulus plan.

Others are leery because his administration didn't divulge his budget proposals until shortly before he delivered his annual address.

"I think he tried to sound conciliatory, but the very fact that he was unwilling to release any details whatsoever of this speech _ as has been the case for every year prior to this _ says 'I don't really want to work with you,'" said Republican Sen. Christine Radogno of Lemont.

House Republican Leader Tom Cross said many General Assembly members feel like wronged spouses and, just like in a troubled marriage, it will take time to rebuild trust.

Cross said that doesn't mean lawmakers won't give Blagojevich's ideas a fair hearing. Lawmakers also are fed up with the infighting, mostly between Blagojevich and House Speaker Michael Madigan, that has splintered the Democrats who control Springfield, he said.

Blagojevich acknowledges "it'd be nice to be able to work in a more harmonious way together to get these things done."

His spokeswoman, Abby Ottenhoff said Blagojevich has and will continue to meet with lawmakers. She said the success of the current legislative session rests on how willing everyone is to come

together.

She said Blagojevich is open to compromise, like he was late last year when he was willing to go along with some lawmakers and accept gambling expansion as a way to pay for a statewide construction program, a plan that eventually went nowhere.

"He continues to be open to their ideas," she said.

The governor may ultimately accomplish some of what he wants because lawmakers facing re-election this fall will want to show they can get things done in Springfield, said University of Illinois at Springfield political scientist Kent Redfield. A worsening economy might also help Blagojevich push through his plans to cut business taxes, give families a tax credit of \$300 per child and raise money for the state through a partial lease of the lottery.

But if Blagojevich scores any wins, it won't be because lawmakers fell in line behind a governor whose relations with them have soured the longer he is in office.

"I don't think anybody believes him and anybody trusts him," Redfield said.

Blagojevich's nemesis Madigan also shows no sign of getting on board.

"We can always count on Gov. Blagojevich to give a fine speech. However, we have learned from hard-won experience that the devil is always in the details when dealing with his fiscal plans," Madigan said in a statement.

But Comptroller Dan Hynes, a Democrat, said Blagojevich took a step forward by asking lawmakers to work with him. A chief criticism of Blagojevich has been his tendency to strike out on his own, implementing programs and spending money on things rejected by the Legislature.

"He did not have a good year last year," Hynes said. "The governor pretty much came away empty-handed and ... the proper way to respond to that is not to dig in but to reach out, and I hope he's going to do that."

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