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Lottery proposal has GOP buzzing

COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

BY REBECCA O'HALLORAN AND PETE SHERMAN
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SPRINGFIELD - Downstate Republican politicians are concerned the governor's \$10 education funding proposal is simply lip service to prevent a third-party candidate running for governor.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich announced Tuesday plans for the state to lease the lottery to generate more money for schools.

Details of the compromise between Gov. Rod Blagojevich and state Sen. James Meeks independent from Chicago, were kept from lawmakers until the formal announcement Tuesday.

"If the governor was serious about reforming funding for education and wanted to do it in a meaningful way, we'd be calling people together and figuring out an equitable plan," said Rep. Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville, who also is a school superintendent. "You have to have a plan that is thrown together almost as a reaction to a threat."

Meeks considered a run in the November gubernatorial race after he thought Blagojevich failed to provide adequate funding for schools.

The two-man compromise that resulted in Meeks formally announcing he won't run for governor upset area GOP lawmakers, who said the plan doesn't represent what's best for the entire state.

"To me, this is shameful policy ... simply as a threat from a state senator from the city of Chicago," said Rep. Rich Brauer, R-Petersburg. "No one in business, no one in the legislature, would sell an asset to take care of an operational expense, and that's the way it should be in government."

Lawmakers expressed concern that the lottery is too valuable to sell in exchange for a chance to be re-elected.

"We're selling an asset that's generating a tremendous amount of money," said Sen. Bomke, R-Springfield. "Once that asset's gone you can't get it back unless you buy it back."

Bomke said he was pleased the plan would set aside \$1.5 billion for school construction. He represents the Rochester school district, which began construction two years ago and will cost \$10 million to complete the project.

However, Bomke would like to see more details.

"It's just not real clear to me what he's proposing," Bomke said. "It does appear as if it to buy off a potential opponent and using state funds to do it."

Rep. Gary Hannig of Litchfield and Sens. Deanna Demuzio and John Sullivan of Rus Democrats, did not return telephone calls seeking reaction.

Lawmakers aren't the only ones who want to know more about the proposal.

Springfield School District officials began looking through the list of promised items after the announcement was made.

"(School superintendent) Diane Rutledge and I just finished looking at the plan. So construction, textbooks, improving libraries, extending the district's mentoring program after-school funding and special education (funding) - all would be very helpful," said spokeswoman Carol Votsmier.

Though most of the bumps in spending sounded appealing, there were a couple points of confusion, such as whether the governor's proposal to extend the school year means prolonging it for every student or offering more summer school options.

A longer year for everyone might not be practical, given most schools in the district lack air conditioning. The latest estimate to install air-conditioning units in every school is \$10 million, Votsmier said.

Votsmier also hinted that Blagojevich's "performance pay for teachers" plan remains controversial, with only a few places in the country experimenting with it.

However, Votsmier said she was encouraged that, at least, Blagojevich is promoting some kind of education funding reform.

"Ideas are great," she said. "We're always happy to listen to ideas."

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