

Rep. Jil Tracy Newsletter

January 15, 2010

Rep. Tracy: Quinn's State of the State Short on Answers to Most Pressing Problems

The Governor's recent State of the State address was sorely lacking in any meaningful offer of solutions on how to address our State's budget calamities. The Governor should be commended for offering to do this speech as there hadn't been one offered by the past Governor for several years. According to the Illinois Constitution the Governor is supposed to use the State of the State address to "report to the General Assembly on the condition of the state." Governor Quinn totally missed this point. He was more interested in touting the few noteworthy accomplishments of last year, such as keeping open state parks and passing an infrastructure program. However, the State of the State address should detail the current condition of our state and future recommendations on how we can better Illinois. Certainly this would include a plan or suggestion of how we are going to pull ourselves out of a multi-billion dollar budget deficit estimated to be between \$12-13 billion dollars. Instead, we were treated to anecdotes about how our Governor earned the title Mr. Soybean, a briefing on the Shedd Aquarium's soy paint roof and we were encouraged to become more energy efficient with the use of caulk guns and soy paint. These are all fine thoughts for a casual sit-down, but I don't think we are going to caulk or paint our way out of a twelve billion dollar budget hole.

This is a time that begs for true leadership from our chief executive. We need someone who is going to lay out a vision for the future, explore creative solutions, and most importantly lay the groundwork to begin fixing our horrible financial situation. The people of Illinois deserve straightforward answers to these pressing issues, and to simply ignore a record amount of unpaid bills and unprecedented budget deficit only exasperates the problem. Generalities are just not going to get the job done. I think we all support more transportation projects, renewable energy initiatives and proposals that will bring needed jobs to the Land of Lincoln, but you have to have a thorough plan to accomplish those goals and we didn't hear that. We need real answers and effective guidance. If the Governor is going to make cuts, where are those reductions going to come from? If the Governor is going to raise revenue, what plan does he have to accomplish that? We didn't hear answers to any of those questions.

If Governor Quinn is being honest about making systematic changes to state government he is going to have to address some unpopular decisions, which he apparently forgot on Wednesday. Things such as reducing Medicaid expenditures, evaluating a number of programs put in place under the Blagojevich administration and addressing our State overspending trend. Most importantly we can not just throw more money at the current problem. We have to ensure



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laws are in place to reform spending practices. That means enacting spending caps until debts are paid, and learning to live on a lean, streamlined budget that does not continue to ignore costs of state programs. Until that takes place, we will end up facing the same dire circumstances year after year.

State Sells Bonds

The state finally got around to selling about \$3.4 billion worth of bonds last week. A large portion of the funds will go directly to pension payments, but that frees up \$843 million that can be used to pay down our massive backlog of unpaid bills. Schools throughout the 93rd district have been waiting months for state reimbursements, many state universities are owed hundreds of millions in back payments, and a number of social service providers can not survive much longer without receiving the money they are owed. Hopefully the newly released funds will be spread around to temporarily avert any immediate crisis or potential closings.

Feds to Acquire Thomson Correctional Center

As most are probably aware, the state is planning to sell a new, but never fully used, prison in northwestern Illinois to the Federal Government. Thomson Correctional Center (TCC), a maximum security facility, was completed in 2001 at the cost of over \$140 million dollars. The state-of-the-art prison was never fully used due to ongoing budget problems that made it difficult to find funding to fully staff and house inmates at the correctional center. There was also a continuing debate on which older prisons should be downsized or closed.

Recently, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons and the Department of Defense became interested in buying the prison, with the purpose of transferring detainees currently housed at Guantanamo Bay to Thomson. I personally disagree with the policy to close Guantanamo Bay and bring these detainees into our country. I visited with Congressman Aaron Schock last year after he had toured this facility and was assured by his personal observation on the conditions and treatment there. Nevertheless, the Federal government has made this decision and it now appears approximately 100 GITMO detainees could call Illinois home if the sale proceeds as scheduled.

The formal process to transfer the few inmates held at TCC has already begun, with ruling in favor of shuttering the facility. However a number of questions remain and this certainly is not an issue that should be rushed.

From my perspective, the most frustrating aspect was the process by which this plan was negotiated. In order to sell a piece of state property it must first be declared "surplus." TCC can not be considered surplus until it is shut down and empty. In order to do this the Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability (COGFA) must hold a formal hearing on closing the prison. Governor Quinn made it quite clear that the sale was going to commence even before this hearing was held on December 22. We have seen what happens when hasty decisions on such important matters are made. Take for instance the Governor's botched early prisoner release programs, which set violent offenders free. This likely would not have happened if it were done in full public view with all the questions answered. A decision of this magnitude that involves the safety of millions of people

deserves full transparency, especially when we are talking about bringing known terrorists onto Illinois soil.

The other big question has to do with money. Mainly, how much is the state of Illinois going to get for the facility and where are those funds going to be spent? So far we have not received answers to these questions. Some have said we will get back what we paid for the prison, while others maintained it could be less. The state still carries debt on the bonds used to pay for the construction of the prison, so clearly those should be paid first. One should take into consideration that the state of Illinois began building this prison over a decade ago. Construction costs were much cheaper then, and eventually Illinois will need another prison, meaning in the next decade we easily could be paying upwards of \$300 million to replace Thomson. Please let me hear your comments and thoughts on the sale of the facility, the potential for economic impact and concerns you might have.

Devastating Earthquake Destroys Haiti

If you have been watching the news lately you have seen the images of devastating destruction that occurred in Haiti as the result of a 7.0 earthquake. One of our own legislators, Senator Kwame Raoul (Chicago) is of Haitian decent, and as of yesterday had not been able to locate all of his relatives. I would like to reach out to everyone who is interested in lending a helping hand to the many victims of this tragedy. For those interested, below is a set of contact numbers where they are accepting donations to bring much needed aid to the people of Haiti.

- Text Haiti to 90999 to donate \$10 to Red Cross efforts in Haiti. The \$10 amount will automatically be tacked onto donors' phone bills. This program is backed by the U.S. State Department.
- Local Lowes stores are collecting donations.
- Call the Red Cross at 1-800-Red Cross or 1-800-257-7575. This is an unrestricted donation – meaning it may or may not go to Haiti. You can also log onto the Red Cross website, www.redcross.org, to learn more and donate if you so choose.

For more information about the campaign, please visit my website at www.electjiltracy.com My email is jiltracy@yahoo.com

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