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GOP attacking Gov. Quinn over income tax increase

By Kevin McDermott

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — It's still unclear whether Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn's proposed tax hike will fix Illinois' fiscal crisis. But it's already paying political dividends for state Republicans.

In an early run-up to the 2010 statewide elections, top Republicans are using the newly unveiled tax proposal to excoriate Quinn and his fellow Democrats who control Illinois government. The GOP is going on television and across the Internet to take Quinn to task on his claim that the tax won't hit lower-income Illinoisans.

On one website (friendsofblago.com), the party offers a "tax calculator" that shows how single, childless taxpayers making as little as \$25,000 a year will see higher tax bills under Quinn's plan.

"It's Blagojevich Democrats who kept increasing spending for six years," Illinois Republican Party chairman Andy McKenna said in a Monday appearance on the Fox News affiliate in Chicago, referring to impeached Democratic ex-Gov. Rod Blagojevich. Quinn "should have stood up years ago and said to the governor, 'You're spending too much.' He went along with it. Now he wants to throw it on the backs of taxpayers."

Quinn's proposal would raise the state's current 3 percent flat rate income tax to 4.5 percent. He would couple that with an increase in the per-person standard deduction (to \$6,000 from the current \$2,000) so lower-income families with children wouldn't see a tax increase, and in many cases would see a tax reduction.

Quinn and other Democrats say the proposed tax hike is necessary to address a projected \$11.6 billion state budget deficit. They blame the situation partly on mismanagement by Blagojevich, a fellow Democrat. Quinn, formerly lieutenant governor, took office after the Legislature removed Blagojevich in January for

mismanagement and alleged corruption.

In Quinn's budget speech last week, unveiling the proposed tax hike, he challenged critics of it to offer their own solutions — a challenge his office continues to make in the face of Republican attacks.

"Over the past few years, Gov. Quinn was outspoken about the unethical and irresponsible management of the state's finances by the former governor," Quinn spokeswoman Katie Ridgeway said in a statement responding to McKenna's comments. "... To all the naysayers, Gov. Quinn invites them to explain how they would close the \$11.6 billion budget deficit."

Republicans still haven't answered that question, other than to call for spending cuts. That approach alone can't erase the deficit, because much government spending is legally mandated, for Medicaid, education and other big-ticket items.

But the GOP anti-tax campaign — coupled with the party's ongoing quest to keep Blagojevich on voters' minds — could nonetheless be the Republicans' best chance at regaining power next year, after being banished for six years by voters fed up with Republican ex-Gov. George Ryan.

"It's manna from heaven for them," says Chris Mooney, a political scientist at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "It's Judy Baar Topinka dancing with George Ryan."

Topinka, the Republicans' 2006 gubernatorial candidate, lost in part because she was perceived as being too close to Ryan, who is now serving a federal prison term for corruption. The Democratic campaign against Topinka included a devastating old film clip of her and Ryan dancing together at a GOP political function.

Blagojevich and legislative Democrats had a tense relationship through most of his tenure, which broke into open political warfare until after his 2006 re-election.

But Mooney said Democrats went along with Blagojevich for too long to cry foul now about the latest GOP campaign.

"Pat Quinn is not Blagojevich," said Mooney. "On the other hand, the Democrats did go along with (Blagojevich's) smoke-and-mirrors budgets for years."

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