

Emil Jones supposedly to retire

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By Scott Reeder

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State Senate President Emil Jones, D-Chicago, is expected to announce today that he is retiring, a member of his caucus, Sen. Mike Jacobs, D-East Moline, disclosed late Sunday.

"Emil called me tonight and said that he has been thinking about it for two years and has decided to retire," Jacobs said. "He said he will announce it at a news conference Monday." But Jones' spokeswoman Cindy Davidsmeyer declined to comment.

If he leaves, the Senate president's departure would open the doors to a free-for-all for his job.

For weeks, rumors of Jones' impending departure have circulated in Springfield, and some speculation has centered around the possibility of his son, Emil Jones III, taking his Senate district seat.

State Sen. Debbie Halvorson, D-Crete, the Senate majority leader, refused comment on the matter when contacted this morning, saying she will wait until Jones makes an official announcement.

At least one longtime colleague was skeptical.

"Emil called my son, Mike, and said that he going to retire," said former state Sen. Denny Jacobs. "But Emil has a history of changing his mind. I certainly wish him well, if he indeed retires. He served with my father in the House, he served with me in the Senate and he serves with my son, Mike, -- three generations of Jacobs."

Jones called each member of the Senate Democratic caucus to inform them of his announcement, Mike Jacobs said. He added Jones told him he plans to serve out the remainder of his term, which ends in January.

Jones is Gov. Rod Blagojevich's closest ally among the legislative leaders and does not face any opposition in the November election.

"I can't say that I'm surprised by this," said Charles Wheeler III, a professor of public affairs reporting at the University of Illinois at Springfield and a longtime observer of the Illinois General Assembly. "Emil really hurt members of his caucus by aligning himself so closely with Gov. Blagojevich. He really should have been looking out for the interests of his members rather than watching the back of the most unpopular governor in recent memory,"

Wheeler said Jones, during his tenure, has been a steadfast supporter of education. "It used to be that federal money to help at-risk students was distributed evenly among all the state's school districts. But Emil Jones successfully pushed for that money to only go to school districts where poverty was the greatest," Wheeler said.

Jones was U.S. Sen. Barack Obama's political mentor during his formative years in politics.