

As new state lawmakers take oath, they talk big plans

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SPRINGFIELD -- Many of the Illinois lawmakers sworn into the 96th General Assembly Wednesday said their top priority for the spring is dealing with the state's serious money problems.

By the end of the legislature's spring session, lawmakers could have to weigh proposals for deep cuts to state services and various kinds of tax increases in order to shore up the state's books.

"We're going to be looking at cutting off some arms and legs before this thing is over," said state Sen. Mike Jacobs, D-East Moline.

But the battle over the budget might not come to a head until May – after the impeachment process currently underway against Gov. Rod Blagojevich has ended.

Members of the Illinois House took their oaths of office outside their ornate Capitol chamber, instead opting for a large auditorium at nearby University of Illinois at Springfield.

Before they left the crowded auditorium, the House impeached Blagojevich again – formalizing what they did in the prior General Assembly for the current one. The governor, meanwhile, presided over the Illinois Senate's inauguration at the Capitol. They'll soon get to work on a trial to determine whether to kick him out of office.

In the meantime, the 177 lawmakers sworn in Wednesday will soon begin working on legislation intended to deal with a myriad of other issues. Among them is a push to enact an expensive capital construction program meant to fix the state's roads, bridges and university and prison

buildings.

"When you get down to it the capital bill and the budget will be the most important thing we do," said state Sen. Gary Forby, a Benton Democrat sworn in after winning a close election in November.

People are already throwing out ideas to accomplish both of those goals. State Rep. John Bradley, D-Marion, has floated an idea to raise the state gas tax to pay for road construction.

State Rep. Shane Cultra, R-Onarga, has embraced a plan that would trade off an increase in sales taxes for a decrease in property taxes. State Rep. Dan Brady, R-Bloomington, said he's mulling legislation to help local school districts.

State Rep. Bill Mitchell, R-Forsyth, said he's considering ethics legislation that would prohibit a lawmaker's spouse or child from working for the state.

Other lawmakers might focus on often-controversial issues such as gun control. State Rep. David Reis, R-Willow Hill, said he'll probably push to allow citizens to carry concealed firearms. State Rep. Chapin Rose, R-Mahomet, said he wants to allow people to better defend themselves against getting errant traffic tickets on the Chicago-area tollway system.

State Rep. Patrick Verschoore, D-Milan, said he has toyed with the idea of allowing rural school districts to have four-day weeks in order to save gasoline. State Rep. Mike Boland said he wants to give students money toward community college if they perform well in high school.

"If kids follow straight and narrow path for four years they would be given free tuition at a community college," Boland said.

But the fact is, thousands of ideas are proposed as legislation every year, and only a fraction of them are ever approved. Some of those plans could be further hampered by the economy,

leaving little money available for new ideas.

"The task before us is to find the discipline to bring that spending under control," said state Sen. Dale Righter, R-Mattoon.