

Bernard Schoenburg: Longtime observer Wheeler doesn't like what he sees

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This is not great news for Gov. PAT QUINN or all those folks with social service agencies worried about the coming crimp in state funding.

CHARLIE WHEELER has been watching goings-on at the Statehouse for nearly four decades, and he's not hopeful that an income tax increase will pass before the new fiscal year begins July 1.

"I've been saying since Quinn took over that I assumed they would get it done, they would be able to work things out," said Wheeler. "That, so far, hasn't proven to be the case, so I don't know.

"The thing that really I see as more likely is that they won't get it done, there will be these draconian cuts, real live human people will suffer dramatically, and then they'll come back and do what they should have done."

How long will that take?

"I have no idea," he said. "One would hope not very long."

I asked Wheeler about this because of his long experience and state budget expertise. He has been director of the public affairs reporting master's degree program at the University of Illinois at Springfield since 1993 and earlier was a reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times for more than 20 years. The UIS program places interns each year with Statehouse news bureaus during legislative sessions. And Wheeler still writes a column for Illinois Issues magazine.

Wheeler is an advocate of an income tax increase who says he's voted in primaries of both major parties over the years, but in Democratic ones recently.

He says a tax increase vote "shouldn't really be that hard," but lawmakers now are "used to not having to do any heavy lifting." Those against the increase, he said, are "showing a great deal of cowardice."

Wheeler said that with the institution of a state income tax in 1969 — action just before he came to Springfield to cover the state constitutional convention late that year — and other increases or attempted increases in 1983 and 1989, Republican leaders came through with enough votes to keep the state afloat, despite the anti-tax stand of their party. And in those past years, he said, state revenue would have increased even without the new taxes, while this year, revenue is down.

When then-Gov. RICHARD OGILVIE passed the first state income tax in Illinois in '69, Wheeler said, more Republicans than Democrats voted for it. When then-Gov. JIM THOMPSON proposed an increase in 1983, then-Senate President James "Pate" Philip, a fellow Republican, was reluctantly on board.

"So there's a history of bipartisanship on this stuff," he said.

Wheeler is among those who don't think the state can cut its way out of what the Quinn administration has said is a budget hole of about \$9 billion.

"Everybody says, Oh, he's crying 'wolf,'" Wheeler said of Quinn. But Wheeler thinks that people who don't think the cuts will be deep and real are "just hiding their heads in the sand."

If state government funding does get deeply cut as the new fiscal year begins, Wheeler said both parties can be blamed. And of course, Democrats control both the House and the Senate.

Still, he said, "I would lay it on Republicans" because that party's leaders in previous tax battles "have not taken it .. past the brink."

"You look at guys like Thompson and (former Governor) JIM EDGAR — they weren't willing to let this stuff happen," Wheeler said. Edgar was unsuccessful in a 1997 increase attempt blocked by Philip and the Senate GOP.

"Maybe this is an undeserved slight," Wheeler added, "but I don't see (House GOP Leader TOM) CROSS and (Senate GOP Leader CHRISTINE) RADOGNO stepping up the same way that Ogilvie, Thompson and Edgar did to meet the realities of the state's financial situation." He said he assumes they are trying to use the state's situation as leverage against the Democrats for political ends.

"What we need is for the leaders in essence to say, 'OK, we've gone through our song and dance. We've gone through our posturing. We've scared ... people. Now we're going to do the responsible thing."

He also said he thinks most downstate lawmakers of both parties are probably anxious to pass a tax increase if they have a prison or mental health center in their district. Even in the suburbs, social service agencies are up in arms over proposed cuts.

"I hope I'm wrong," Wheeler said about his expectation of a lack of action by the end of the month, "but given the current crew of folks who are in charge, it wouldn't surprise me."

I contacted spokeswomen for Radogno and Cross for response, and they clearly took a different view.

"These are choices that the Democrat leaders who run the state government have made," said Radogno spokeswoman PATTY SCHUH. "They made a choice to fund 100 percent of a great deal of state government at the governor's request, but yet make draconian cuts on some of the state's most vulnerable citizens. They made that choice. Senate Republicans did not support that budget."

For the entire six years of the administration of former Democratic Gov. ROD BLAGOJEVICH, and during 2009, Schuh said, "what we've been talking about is reform and efficiencies, growing the economy," but now there's the demand for a tax increase.

"The Republican leaders have been clear and consistent throughout that the people of Illinois are demanding change," Schuh added, and passing a tax increase with the promise of "maybe" talking about reforms later is not realistic.

"The taxpayers of Illinois do not want to pay more for a system that needs a tuneup," she said.

SARA WOJCICKI, spokeswoman for Cross, also said that in areas including pension benefits for future employees and Medicaid, there need to be changes.

"We must enact some of these reforms before we go to the taxpayer and ask for more money to pump into this obviously broken system," she said.

She also agreed that the budget with the deep cuts to certain programs "was a budget that the Democrats passed. We didn't vote for that."

"Representative Cross has been very adamant about these different areas" of reform, Wojcicki said, adding that there are "lists and lists" of ideas.

"Unfortunately, we just keep going to these meetings with no action on some of these reforms. ... We are no further today than we were on June 1 when we (the legislature) left Springfield.

"Anything's possible in the next several days, and we're hopeful that the Democrats can get on board with some reforms," Wojcicki said. "But all they seem to want to talk about is the tax increase."

It could be a long summer.

Kevin Davlin files suit

KEVIN DAVLIN, 49, a brother of Springfield Mayor TIM DAVLIN, has taken a Springfield woman to court over an accident two years ago. But he says the real target of the legal action is her insurance company.

Kevin Davlin was run off the road while on a motorcycle at Ash and Whittier streets a couple of years ago in Springfield, and said at the time that he felt "so sorry" for the "very, very nice woman" who "just switched lanes" and "didn't see me."

"She was more upset than I was about it," he said at the time. He had separated a couple of ribs, and was on the mend at the time I spoke with him about it less than two weeks later.

Davlin, who lives in Colorado and Springfield, said at the time that his vehicle was one of four Harley-Davidsons and a chopper he owned.

Still, a pending case in Sangamon County Circuit Court, filed in January, has Davlin suing the driver, KITTIE WEST, and asking for more than \$50,000.

Bills claimed by Davlin include more than \$11,000 in medical costs and compensation for 61 days being without his motorcycle, while the rental cost from Harley-Davidson dealers in the metro St. Louis area at that time would be \$135 per day.

Davlin and his Springfield lawyer, GARY CLINE, made it clear the case isn't personal.

"Regrettably, this doesn't have so much to do with Miss West as it does her insurance company," Cline said. "We actually had a mediation before we filed the claim. That was unsuccessful."

He said Allstate is her insurance company, and has not been willing to negotiate a settlement. "You can't sue the insurance company directly," Cline said.

Kevin Davlin this week said West is "a wonderful human being" and "a very nice person."

"She's just got a terrible insurance company," said Davlin, a businessman and lawyer himself.

Kevin Davlin added that he told West after the accident that he wouldn't show up in court so the charge against her of improper lane usage could be dismissed. The charge was in fact dismissed, records show.

Davlin said he bought his fourth motorcycle after the accident because of the projected repair time, but Illinois law still allows someone to claim rental costs as he is doing. He also said he's asking more than \$50,000 — even though that far exceeds his claimed medical and lack-of-motorcycle costs — because that puts the matter in the legal category of "law" case, and it will be up to a jury to decide if he'll actually be able to get that much, if it goes to trial.

"It is our company policy that we do not comment on specific claims for the privacy rights of our customers," said Allstate spokesman ERIC SCOTT.

Bernard Schoenburg is political columnist for The State Journal-Register. He can be reached at 788-1540 or bernard.schoenburg@sj-r.com.

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