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Lawmakers question timing of Quinn's speech

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Two weeks into 2010, Gov. Pat Quinn will stand before legislators and lay out his vision for state government.

His State of the State address could be a State of the Campaign address as well, some lawmakers say. Quinn delivers it Jan. 13 — less than three weeks before he tries to win the Feb. 2 Democratic primary election.

"It would appear to me that it's nothing less than for the governor to take advantage of his office," said Sen. Larry Bomke, R-Springfield.

Quinn's office on Wednesday confirmed the Jan. 13 speech but wouldn't answer questions about what he would include or respond to the political-motivations criticism.

A political scientist says he understands the criticism, but such perks come with being an incumbent governor.

"It's advantage Quinn. He's the governor, he gets to do these kinds of things," said Chris Mooney of the Institute of Government and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "I think it will be a positive for Quinn if he plays it right."

No set date for addresses

It's not unusual for governors to give their State of the State addresses in January, but that's not been the norm of late.

Rod Blagojevich delivered two of his six State of the States in January. The others came in either February or March and several times were combined with his budget address.

Quinn gave his first State of the State and budget address jointly last year in March. Lawmakers granted him extra time when he took over for the impeached Blagojevich Jan. 29.

The state Constitution broadly requires governors at the beginning of each yearly legislative session to report to lawmakers on the "condition of the state and recommend such measures as he deems desirable."

Under state law, governors must give their budget addresses by the third Wednesday in February. But that has been extended into March several times because of budget problems and last year with Blagojevich's impeachment.

Quinn already has asked lawmakers to again delay his budget address until the end of March. A measure to give him more budget preparation time stalled in the October veto session but could resurface in January.

The budget elephant

What Quinn covers — and doesn't cover — in the State of the State address will be watched closely.

The speech brings with it a statewide spotlight, with media outlets providing live coverage and lawmakers gathering together in the House chamber in a rare joint session to hear what the governor wants to tell them.

The state's budget problems continue to grow. Quinn is facing a challenge from Comptroller Dan Hynes in the primary, and they accuse the other of being weaker in leading on the budget and other key issues.

Asked about the speech's timing Wednesday, Hynes said: "I can tell you what the state of the state is right now. It's one crisis right after another and no solutions."

Some lawmakers see Quinn using the speech to tout his accomplishments since taking office and leaving more difficult budget talk — tax increases, deep spending cuts — for after the primary. Quinn has proposed a large income tax increase to fix budget holes, but that stalled in the legislature last year.

Ignoring the budget elephant in the chamber could backfire, they say, if voters don't hear much discussion of the biggest problem facing the state.

"If you try to paint an overly rosy or overly optimistic picture, it's one that can be challenged pretty strongly," said Sen. Dave Syverson, R-Rockford. "He can be called on the carpet pretty easy with that."

Can't go too positive

Mooney said such speeches are by their nature political. He expects Quinn's handlers to focus on how the governor has righted the ship of state since Blagojevich's impeachment, without going too positive.

"They'll calibrate this to put the best spin on it as can be done," Mooney said.

Senate President John Cullerton, D-Chicago, downplayed the timing of Quinn's speech.

"There's always an election," said Cullerton, who has not endorsed in the race. "We'll just wait and see what the people do on February Second." But he added he and Illinoisans will be looking for the governor to make economic and budget recovery a key part of his speech.

"That's got to be his No. 1 emphasis," Cullerton said Wednesday at an unrelated Statehouse news conference. "We've been playing defense this past year. We've got to start promoting the state and promoting the idea of more jobs."

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