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What's up (or down) with state spending

Legislators put the budget in Gov. Quinn's hands — now everyone is trying to make sense of the numbers

By Monique Garcia, Tribune reporter

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Gov. Pat Quinn crafted this year's state budget with nearly unfettered power to cut programs as he saw fit.

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The unprecedented authority to spend weeks deciding what to know that each move was under the magnifying glass:

That fact was not lost on lawmakers who have set strict spending limits in increments as small as \$100 million one of their chief responsibilities this year in a row after being undercut ahead of the November

"They (shoveled) it all to Quinn and (said) 'Here, it's your job to try to figure out how to pay \$10 worth of expenses with this \$5 billion that we've given you,'" said Charles N. Wheeler III, a state government and journalism expert at the University of Illinois-Springfield. "They are pretty much saying if it's him going down in flames for this or me going down in flames, adios Pat Quinn."

In addition to a bigger budget axe, the General Assembly handed Quinn a \$3.4 billion pot of money to fill holes. A picture of Quinn's priorities began to emerge: He used much of that cash to prevent larger cuts to education and public health services, and has about \$180 million left to pay for emergencies as they arise.

Elementary and higher education took a hit of \$341 million, but that's nowhere near the \$1.3 billion cut Quinn threatened this spring if lawmakers didn't go along with a 1-percentage-point income tax increase.

The mentally ill and developmentally disabled will suffer under \$312 million in cuts to the Illinois Department of Human Services.

Quinn also has announced \$891 million will be held in reserve, another form of budget cuts. But the governor has provided little detail about those cuts, which he said will come as the year progresses.

Critics say they don't trust Quinn to withhold the money as promised, saying he vowed to cut last year's

budget but has provided little proof that he actually did. A Republican analysis found the state actually spent \$200 million more in last year's budget than the year before, while a state comptroller report found that overall spending was up by \$530 million through nine months of the previous budget year.

"It's all bogus," said Rep. Jack Franks, a Marengo Democrat who voted against giving Quinn expanded budget powers. "None of this is real. In reality he cut very little from the budget, and he shouldn't pretend he's made the hard decisions because he's done very little."

But Quinn insists the cuts will be realized, saying "it's not speculative."

"The cuts are going to happen," Quinn said Friday. "It's not an easy exercise, the legislature really kind of didn't want to do this at all. They shouldered it all over to me, the governor, and that's what I'm doing."

Quinn has outlined \$155 million in specific cuts using his veto power, including cuts in operational expenses for the Historical Preservation Agency, the Illinois Emergency Management Agency, the Violence Prevention Authority and the boards of trustees that oversee the state's public universities. He also issued an executive order requiring agencies to cut costs on travel, telephones and other small-ticket items.

His Republican governor rival, Bloomington Sen. Bill Brady, said Quinn did not go far enough and cut "less than one-half percent from the state budget."

Quinn said he cut spending to the best of his ability without inflicting widespread pain, suggesting Brady would have cut with disregard.

Rep. Frank Mautino, the House Democratic budget point person, said Quinn has started with a "realistic approach," but that the budget will take constant monitoring by Quinn to prevent the situation from worsening. That's why lawmakers gave Quinn so much budget flexibility.

"He has the ability that no other governor has been given," said Mautino, of Spring Valley. "All have had different budget powers, but no one has had all of these collectively. That's a realization that times are bad, they are going to get worse and he's going to need to manage this."

Quinn said he realizes he will become the poster boy for the state's money woes, but added that it's a responsibility that comes with holding Illinois' highest office.

"That's what a governor does," Quinn said. "You can't be a shrinking violet."

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