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Quinn accentuating positive, burying negative this summer

By Monique Garcia and Ray Long, Tribune Reporters

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Gov. Pat Quinn is spending the summer polishing his image for voters this fall. He's toured jail cells, navigated rubble at construction sites, met with dental students and even shared the podium with his Yorkshire terrier, Bailey, all while signing routine bills into law.

Out of the public eye, however, Quinn has been approving controversial legislation after regular business hours or with little fanfare.

Among them is a law that state gambling regulators contend makes it harder to keep criminals from getting a cut of Illinois' upcoming legalized video poker business. A banking measure quietly became law this week despite conflict-of-interest questions involving the Senate president and House speaker. Another round of budget cuts were dribbled out onto a Web site without notice.

Quinn's not the first governor to accentuate the positive. For Quinn, the steady stream of carefully orchestrated, TV-friendly events allows him to conserve campaign cash and appear gubernatorial. They provide the public with a can-do view that contrasts with Quinn's inability so far to pass the major tax increase he covets and make enough cuts to balance the state budget.

The governor bristles when asked about the disconnect between the feel-good public events and burying controversial decisions.

"Don't you think it's a little silly, really, that you even ask that question?" Quinn said. "The process shows democracy working."

Republican foe Sen. Bill Brady questions Quinn's approach, saying it's a concern that the governor is using state resources to stage elaborate bill signings when he can just as easily take action from the comfort of his office.

"Controversial legislation was signed under the cover of darkness with no public notice whatsoever, but then legislation Pat Quinn believes will provide some political favor with the voters are signed in staged productions," said Brady campaign spokeswoman Patty Schuh. "It's this very kind of thing that turns off the citizens of Illinois and makes them less interested in the governmental process."

As the Nov. 2 election nears, the issues Quinn seizes on are just as telling as those he lets quietly slip by,

advertisement



The advertisement features the Wells Fargo logo in a red box on the left. To its right, the text reads "Wells Fargo private student loans". Below this is a photograph of a young woman with dark hair, wearing a yellow top, smiling and talking to a man whose profile is partially visible on the left. The background is a bright, modern office or library setting. At the bottom of the ad, a green banner contains the quote "I got help with every step of the student loan process" in white text. To the right of the quote is a red button with the white text "Learn More".

said Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

"Mixing business with politics is as old as the Republic," Redfield said. "How you handle these things is going to depend on whether you can use them for your advantage and gets you coverage in terms that are generally favorable for the narrative you're mapping. And other issues, you do them late on a Friday because you want to minimize the coverage and you don't want the attention."

That's what happened with the video gambling bill, as Quinn announced by e-mail last Friday that he had signed it along with other bills more than two hours after state offices closed. Quinn said he approved the measure so late in the day because he simply had "a lot of things to do," including an earlier bill signing at a YMCA on the city's West Side.

The low-profile approach allowed to Quinn to put off explaining why he approved the measure over the objections of the state's chief gambling regulator, who has said the law would be a "disaster" for his agency. The law scales back an Illinois Gaming Board rule to require those wishing to operate video gambling terminals to testify they had not previously used the machines illegally.

"I don't want to get into a political battle," said Aaron Jaffe, a former Cook County judge who is Gaming Board chairman. "I've tried to divorce this agency from politics. He knows exactly where I stand on this, and we have a difference of opinion. What can I say?"

Quinn said he decided to sign off on the idea because he's confident gambling regulators have all the power they need to keep criminals out of the video poker business. Quinn also said if he didn't sign the law, veterans groups across the state who already operate machines for entertainment would have had to throw them out of VFW halls, resulting in less money to support troop causes.

The gambling measure was shepherded through the legislature by well-connected lobbyists for the Illinois Coin Machine Operators Association, including Joseph Berrios. He's a longtime ally of House Speaker Michael Madigan and Madigan's choice to become the next county assessor.

Quinn also signed a bill to protect banks that charge customers an extra five days of interest a year. The governor did so in the late afternoon this week when his public schedule was done for the day.

The Tribune had highlighted the legislation as a potential conflict of interest after the measure passed the Senate with no opposition. Senate President John Cullerton, D-Chicago, is a partner at a law firm that represents banks impacted by it. Cullerton said he had no conflict. Speaker Madigan, D-Chicago, later voted "present," saying he would abstain to avoid a potential conflict because his law firm also represents banks involved.

Quinn continues to stage public events nearly every day, supporters surrounding him as he carefully signs his name to transform a bill into law. He'll often use a different ceremonial pen to ink each letter — trinkets he hands out to lawmakers, advocates and schoolchildren as TV cameras roll.

"It's a strategy of campaigning without campaigning," Redfield said. "It's something unique that Quinn has that Brady doesn't. Quinn has his official office and duties and can script and orchestrate things for maximum impact."

But Quinn said he simply tries to find "important things to highlight" each day.

"We've had governors before me, one Republican and one Democrat, who were criticized by the media for never showing up," Quinn said. "I believe in being open and accessible."

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