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State suffers from Rauner-Madigan machismo

By Jim Nowlan

Gov. Bruce Rauner and Illinois House Speaker Mike Madigan are taking themselves way too seriously over the state budget impasse—and in the process (or lack of it) they are seriously messing with the lives of seniors, the mentally ill, domestic abuse victims, and college students.

We can help resolve the stand-off by putting pressure on our local lawmakers to force their leaders to craft a budget now—if the lawmakers have the courage to stand up to their bosses.

I participated this past week on a panel discussion in Aurora on the future of Illinois with a savvy ex-legislator, a veteran political writer, and a budget expert. Their prognoses for the state's future were grim.

The ex-lawmaker said he didn't think the budget stalemate would be resolved until after the November 2016 election, which would mean a year-and-a-half without a state budget! He thinks lawmakers will not be persuaded to vote for the tax increases necessary to balance the budget until they are safely re-elected.

The budget expert—a moderate Republican—said that \$8 billion in annual new revenue would be needed, at least for a few years, to balance the budget, pay off old bills and provide a stable, predictable fiscal future.

Eight billion dollars is the equivalent of an increase of two percentage points—from 3.75 to 5.75 percent—in the rate of the individual income tax, not that this is the only way to raise such revenue.

After the panel, the head of a non-profit shelter for battered women came up to me. “One third of my budget comes from the state,” she noted. “I can't keep going much longer.” This is the lament of hundreds of such organizations, some of which have already closed their doors.

On the other hand, many state vendors, those with the cash flow to survive absent state dollars, are providing their wares to the state with a smile—for they will receive late payment penalties of 12 percent a year for their help in financing the state. What a way to run a railroad.

If I thought the impasse might result in a transformation of Illinois into a dramatically better place, the pain the “little people” of the state are suffering might arguably be justified. But it won't.

Political power in the state is rather evenly balanced between a GOP governor and a Democratic legislature. Neither has the power to topple the other, at least not via the budget process.

Speaker Madigan's intransigence shows an apparently heartless disregard for his own people, the poor and struggling who are the foundation of his party.

And as businessman Rauner must know, no chief executive could with a straight face go to his or her board this year and propose investing billions of long-term capital in Illinois, not when the fiscal picture and long-term outlook are so chaotic. Business craves predictability.

Illinois lawmakers should be ashamed of themselves. Republicans cower in fear of the millions that Rauner has threatened to spend to beat them if they don't toe the line.

At the same time, many Democrat legislators have so long been petrified with fear of Madigan and his influence over their legislative careers that they freely admit there is nothing they can do.

But there is.

In the early 1900s, dictatorial U.S. House Speaker "Uncle Joe" Cannon, Republican of Danville, Illinois, was unceremoniously pulled down from his perch by progressive Republicans and opposition Democrats. They had had enough and wouldn't take it any longer.

I recommend that you put down your newspaper right now and call your state rep and senator. Tell them that if they don't *publicly* demand that governor and speaker resolve the budget impasse now, you will vote against them next year. Ask your neighbors to do the same.

Second, sign the petition to put redistricting reform on the ballot next November. For more information, see [mapamendment.org](http://mapamendment.org). This initiative would take the task away from lawmakers, who create often unassailably safe districts for themselves, and give it to a bipartisan commission.

I think our efforts would be appreciated. Rauner and Madigan have to be terribly uncomfortable with what they have wrought.