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Pension Reform Talk, Apologies At Town Hall

Previous Next



Biss & Fine

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State Sen. Daniel Biss addresses Thursday's town hall in Glenview as State Rep. Laura Fine looks on.



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State Sen. Daniel Biss (D-9th) apologized to a room packed with nearly 100 people in Glenview last Thursday for the failure of Illinois legislators to pass a number of important bills before the

legislative session ended May 31.

Freshman State Rep. Laura Fine (D-17th) joined Biss for the town hall in the Glenview Police Department Community Room that focused largely on pension reform.

“We need to look at the catastrophic legislative session that just happened,” Biss said as he began the town hall. “We need to pick apart in detail what happened, but it’s dangerous to spend too much time in a psychological state of despair.”

Biss said the failure of pension reform caused him a week of “soul searching.”

Other issues discussed by the two legislators representing Glenview included concealed carry gun legislation that did pass, gay marriage, state budgets including funding for human services, the state’s business climate and Medicaid that was expanded to be in compliance with the federal Affordable Care Act, also called “Obama Care” by many.

Biss recapped how the state came to its current crisis regarding pensions and why a bill that could affect retirees is one of the answers.

“Over 40% of the problem (state debt) is the state just didn’t do what it was supposed to and over those years over those decades there was a fiction, there was a lie,” Biss said.

“What happened over all those decades was that we told taxpayers, hooray, you get to keep low taxes, we told pension plan participants, hooray, you get to keep this benefit that’s been promised, and we told everybody else, hooray, we don’t have to cut spending and it worked for a while because we were willing to tolerate a bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger hole,” Biss continued. “So here we are with that hole that’s so big that every year it cuts into everything else. It’s so big when we raise taxes from 3 to 5% that brought in \$7 billion a year that is now our annual pension payment. The problem has grown so big that we’re finding it almost impossible to fund other core services and the question is what do you do.”

Biss, who introduced bills whose general themes made their way into Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan’s final pension reform bill, said two competing philosophies ended up killing the bill. Madigan’s bill would have made harsher cuts to pensions, but could have violated an Illinois Constitution mandate not to decrease pension benefits and would have likely ended up challenged in court.

Democratic State Senate President John Cullerton’s competing bill offered less drastic cuts to the pension system but had the support of several key union groups and was less likely to end up in court, Biss said.

Biss said the divide was a philosophical constitutional vs. fiscal argument, both of which would likely end up in court.

Gov. Pat Quinn has called legislators back to Springfield to take another shot at pension reform next week.

On the state’s concealed carry law, Biss said lobbyists for the National Rifle Association left “very happy.” Fine said the new law would preempt local authority and was drafted with language saying “shall carry” not “may carry” meaning, unlike other states, gun owners would not have to prove a need to carry a concealed gun.

On the question of equal marriage, Fine defended bill author State Rep. Greg Harris’ decision to pull the bill before a vote, a move criticized by many equal marriage supporters.

Fine said those on the fence would be more likely to vote against it and said those same legislators would be harder to convince to change their vote later.

She said a survey by Glenbrook South High School students found 80% supportive of gay marriage.

“We got more than 1,200 emails and a high school petition with more than 500 signatures,” said Fine. She said gay rights supporters “should not be discouraged.”

Both Fine and Biss said communications with legislators is critical, even on issues where constituents and legislators agree.

Fine said one of her biggest discoveries was, “What we find acceptable in the suburbs, they find appalling downstate.” She said having a record of what her constituents want goes a long way in debate with legislators holding different viewpoints.

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