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**Grading Quinn's first 7 months; Gov gets mixed reviews, from 'pretty decent job' to 'unbelievably weak'**

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD-When Gov. Quinn, Illinois' accidental governor, signed the state budget last week, he completed the most important test of his seven-month governorship and put the final piece in place for a likely 2010 gubernatorial run.

Quinn avoided a shutdown of state government and managed to stanch a bloodbath in the state's human services network under a stripped-down budget that lawmakers passed in May and he later vetoed.

Since taking over for impeached former Gov. Rod Blagojevich, Quinn also signed off on a record $31 billion state construction package, Illinois' first capital program in a decade, and got a series of ethics reforms, inspired by the Blagojevich scandal, though that package was viewed as too weak by watchdog groups and Quinn's own reform commission.

"I'd give him a 'B,' " said Sen. James Meeks (D-Chicago), when asked to assess Quinn's job performance to date.

"I mean, he had to sit down at a negotiating table with Mike Madigan, who has sat at the table for 30 years. This was Quinn's first time sitting at that table," Meeks said. "And he had to try to come out of it intact, with some of the things he wanted, and have government still running. Government is still running."

Quinn sees his first full legislative session as governor as a resounding success.

"I think it's been a very good first half of the year for the Land of Lincoln," Quinn said. "We were able to pass a number of far-reaching ethics bills, more to do. We were able, I think, to do something really big for jobs. That was imperative, given our economy. And I think we were able also to stabilize our budget situation.

"I think I'm doing a fine job," he said.

But Republicans, and even a handful of voices within his own party, aren't so sure

Quinn emerges with much on which to build a winning campaign for governor.

But his failure to persuade Democratic majorities in the House and Senate to support his income-tax increase or his top ethics priority -- a recall amendment in the state Constitution -- made him appear ineffective to critics.

"He's a nice man, an honest man, a good man. But he's not an executive. He's more like a salesman. He's demonstrated his incapability of running a large enterprise," said Rep. Jack Franks (D-Woodstock), who is considering a primary challenge to Quinn in February, as is Comptroller Dan Hynes.

"The fact Pat Quinn couldn't push through a proposal in a Democrat-controlled General Assembly makes him look unbelievably weak," said Sen. Kirk Dillard (R-Hinsdale), one of several GOP gubernatorial hopefuls.

Despite such criticism, many Democrats view Quinn as their party's current gubernatorial front- runner heading into 2010, particularly with Attorney General Lisa Madigan dropping from the field.

Even her father, House Speaker Michael Madigan, who castigated Quinn earlier this month as a "flip-flopper" because of several evolving budgetary positions, gives passing grades to Quinn's job performance so far.

"Realistically, he did a pretty decent job," Madigan spokesman Steve Brown said. "He had the disaster Wall Street left us and had to try to fashion a budget when you have 5 billion fewer dollars coming in.

"Unlike the crook who preceded him, he was willing to talk about different ideas, not get involved in character assassination and not go out and hire staff to march on people's homes," Brown said.

His ability to close up shop in Springfield on an amicable note last week doesn't guarantee Quinn a primary victory, but it's hard to envision anyone right now being able to derail him, said Rep. Kevin Joyce (D-Chicago), who opposed Quinn's income tax increase.

"I wouldn't want to run against Pat Quinn. One, I think he's what the public wants right now, someone who's a straight shooter," Joyce said. "The bottom line is there wasn't a tax increase. If he stands on the street corner in December or January calling for a tax increase, he's got issues.

"But he's someone that tells the truth, even if it hurts himself, and is brutally honest," Joyce said. "I don't see how you can attack Pat Quinn without stuff flying back in your face."