

Chicago Tribune



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SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2024

BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

Extra pension payment: Do? Don't?

Killing it could spare political headaches, but cost Chicagoans later

By A.D. Quig and Jake Sheridan
Chicago Tribune

The harried search by the City Council and Mayor Brandon Johnson for ways to avoid raising property taxes — and in turn, the ire of their constituents — is leading them back to a question all too familiar in the halls of power in Chicago: Should they spare taxpayers financial pain and themselves political headaches now, even if it costs far more down the road?

Some officials are rallying around the idea of diverting surplus dollars from past years' budgets that were set aside to keep the city's pension funds afloat. The "advance" or "supplemental" pension payment Johnson wants for 2025 is \$272 million, just shy of the \$300 million tax hike he called for then abandoned last week in the face of an overwhelming council revolt against it.

Cutting that pension payment is among the most straightforward fixes floated to fill the gaping property tax hole in Chicago's budget. But there are plenty of warnings against skipping it, including from Johnson's budget team and municipal finance experts.

Among the potential outcomes they predict: Even bigger pension bills to pay later. Ratings agency downgrades for the city's credit, making borrowing more expensive

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INSIDE



STACEY WESCOTT/TRIBUNE

Can new coordinator save Bears' season?

New offensive coordinator Thomas Brown's charisma and infectious "juice" just might be what the team needs. **Chicago Sports**

Europe holds its collective breath

Some fear what President-elect Donald Trump's second term might mean for the future of Ukraine and its war with Russia. **Nation & World**

Inclusivity in art

Chicago's artists of color see a bit more support but want more inclusivity and opportunity in American institutions. **Life+Travel**

Holiday theater

The Top 10 shows for 2024: "Christmas Carol" and "Wonderful Life" make room for "Frozen" and "Die Hard." **A+E**

CULTURE OF CORRUPTION



ILLINOIS' THIRD HOUSE

Lobbying is so ingrained in Springfield it's practically a branch of government, but lawmakers are reluctant to regulate it

By Dan Petrella | Chicago Tribune

When former state Sen. Tom Cullerton walked out of federal prison on April 14, 2023, after serving time for public corruption, he was following in the footsteps of scores of convicted Illinois politicians before him.

Eleven days later, Cullerton headed down another well-worn path for ex-officeholders in the state — he became a lobbyist in Springfield. Lobbying not only earned Cullerton a paycheck but also enabled him to use the access and influence he had accumulated over nearly a decade in the statehouse to help shape public policy, only this time on behalf of paying clients.

Cullerton served seven months of a yearlong sentence after pleading guilty to pocketing a quarter-million dollars in pay and benefits from the Teamsters through a no-show job. A union boss told federal investigators the Democrat from west suburban Villa Park was given the organizer gig as a "favor" to another state senator, who has never been publicly identified.

Above: Lobbyists and others gather around the Illinois Capitol rotunda's circular brass rail outside the House chamber on Feb. 20. The rail is a common meeting place for lobbyists and lawmakers to huddle and hash out issues surrounding legislation and public policy.
BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

ONLINE: Find the ongoing Culture of Corruption series at chicagotribune.com/corruption

Because of provisions in federal law, the conviction meant Cullerton was banned from working for a union or employee benefit plan for 13 years after his release.

But there was nothing stopping him from joining the ranks of the Illinois General Assembly's so-called Third House — the group of nearly 2,300 registered lobbyists who are paid to bend the ears of state officials and sway the votes of lawmakers on behalf of interests ranging from megacorporations such as Amazon and Apple to unions and tiny nonprofits.

Cullerton's quick turn from federal inmate to statehouse lobbyist underscores the insular nature of Springfield, where

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Nuclear plants in Illinois are caught in the crosshairs



An employee looks up at the Unit 2 containment structure for the nuclear plant at the Braidwood Clean Energy Center on Wednesday. Below it are main power transformers and auxiliary transformers, which receive off-site electricity and send off the electricity generated by the plant. **TESS CROWLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Data centers, AI push for more clean power as old, new hurdles exist

By Karina Atkins
Chicago Tribune

As the nation's leading nuclear energy producer, Illinois is uniquely positioned to capitalize on or fall victim to the latest rush for the carbon-free but controversial power.

The federal government promised a new wave of nuclear energy generation more than two decades ago, but steep construction costs scuttled nearly every one of the ambitious projects.

This time, nuclear energy is being pushed by tech giants scrambling to meet climate pledges set long before data centers' power needs skyrocketed, largely because of artificial intelligence. They say this zero-emissions power source

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TODAY'S WEATHER



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Complete forecast on Opinion, Page 12

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