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Would-be senator offers 1st glimpse of his agenda

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If Gov. Rod Blagojevich's appointment of Roland Burris to the U.S. Senate stands, the veteran Illinois politician's entry into one of the world's most exclusive deliberative bodies would mark his first stint as a lawmaker.

His previous offices have left no voting record and offer little guide to what agenda he would pursue in Washington.

In a Tribune interview, Burris sketched the outlines of his positions on key issues for the first time, acknowledging that he has much to learn as he seeks to enter the U.S. Senate at a momentous time in the nation's history.

Burris offered general support for the programs offered by the man who created the vacancy, President-elect [Barack Obama](#)—backing a stimulus agenda for the nation's troubled economy and removing U.S. combat troops from Iraq while increasing the military presence in Afghanistan. But he said Obama should not count on him as a "rubber stamp."

At the same time, Burris said he would support the expansion of O'Hare International Airport, a pet project of Mayor Richard Daley, after staking out an ambivalent position when he ran for mayor in 1995.

Burris maintained it was unfair to seek substantive answers from him about his goals because he hadn't taken the oath of office—even though he had expressed interest in the Senate appointment since last summer.

"I want to get my Senate legs under me and make sure I get down all the rules and regulations," Burris said in the interview, which followed his appearance last week before a House panel that recommended Blagojevich's impeachment. "In the meantime, I will begin to assess the various national issues that are out there in general and the Illinois issues in particular."

Burris' appointment has followed a tortuous path. He was denied entry to the U.S. Senate last week by members who said they would not seat a Blagojevich appointee.

The appointment remained in limbo Saturday as senators reviewed an Illinois Supreme Court ruling that Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White need not sign Burris' appointment paperwork, something the Senate had determined was a prerequisite to his being seated. In response, Burris' lawyers said they would head to federal court Monday if the Senate does not accept the appointment.

If he makes it to the Senate, Burris said the first order of business is addressing the economic crisis. He said he is "favorably disposed to" the fiscal plan Obama laid out to the public last week, though he cautioned that

he has not seen any details beyond press reports.

"I know he made some few changes in it to kind of entice the Republicans to come aboard, but unless there's something that really just rubs me the wrong way, I think what the president-elect has put forward is a very good plan," Burris said.

Though acknowledging federal bailout packages for banks and the auto industry were necessary, Burris said "Main Street" needs the assistance now and that he would endorse any plans that would finance building roads and bridges across the nation.

"The infrastructure legislation that'll put bridges and roads and waterways and those other types of governmental programs will help all of those small businesses," he said. "Then you'll be able to go to a restaurant and eat lunch, you can go to a retail shop and buy yourself a pair of jeans, you'll have money to then dispose of. And we'll be priming the pump of the economy."

Beyond the economy and jobs, Burris said the environment and health care would be on the front burners of his political agenda in the Senate. He said he supports Obama's plan to withdraw troops from Iraq and place more soldiers in Afghanistan to quell the resurgence of the Taliban.

On the domestic side, Burris supports banning assault weapons. In his lone attempt to win a U.S. Senate seat, an unsuccessful bid in 1984, he backed a national handgun ban only to wait to turn in his own handgun a decade later.

Burris also made three consecutive unsuccessful runs for the Democratic nomination for governor—1994, 1998 and 2002. After losing the March 1994 primary, he declared, "Roland Burris' illustrious political career will soon come to an end," and three months later he vowed he wouldn't run for Chicago mayor. But by December, he said he had been drafted into running in the mayoral election as an independent, which he lost to Daley 2-to-1.

During that campaign, Burris was neutral on casino gambling for the city—though years later he lobbied on behalf of pro-gambling interests. Though he supported a third airport in the south suburbs, he took no position on Daley's efforts to expand O'Hare.

Burris said he still supports a third airport, but as a senator he would fight for federal funding to assist the O'Hare expansion.

"I will have to reassess my position on O'Hare," he said. "The dollars are there and the expansion program is under way. . . . It must go forward."

Burris said he has a right to change his mind when situations are altered.

"You tell me somebody who hasn't changed their mind or gotten other information on a situation and then changed their minds," he said. "How about Obama saying he wasn't going to run for president? Do you remember that?"

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