

The senator
with his staff



BURRIS'S PEOPLE

Who joins a Senate staff on short notice?

BY BEN STRAUSS

POLITICS

DESPITE ROLAND BURRIS'S bumpy ride so far as a U.S. senator, more than 500 budding politicians have submitted their resumés for the 50 or so positions in the D.C. and Chicago offices. Even Darrel Thompson's departure as chief of staff on February 20th hasn't stemmed the flood. Here's a closer look at some of the men and women who make up the staff of Illinois's junior senator.

Jim O'Connor, 32, **communications director**

Education: B.A., political science and English literature, Fairfield University, Fairfield, Conn.

Background: O'Connor, a Chicago native, cut his political teeth working on campaigns for the late Cook County Board president **John Stroger**. He also served as press secretary for **Blair Hull's** U.S. Senate campaign in 2004. Most recently he's been a political news commentator for the San Francisco TV station KRON4.

Vera Baker-Merlini, 34, **deputy chief of staff**

Education: B.A., political, legal, and economic analysis, Mills College, Oakland, Calif.

Background: Baker-Merlini was national finance director on **Barack Obama's** 2004 U.S. Senate campaign and deputy political director for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. Prior to that, she worked in client development at a bond broker-dealer, and was a legislative assistant to **U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee** (D-Calif.).

Kenneth Sawyer, 41, **senior adviser**

Education: B.A., political science, Howard University

Background: Sawyer is the nephew of the former Chicago mayor **Eugene Sawyer**, who introduced Burris to the Democratic machine in the late 1970s. Sawyer ran for 3rd Ward alderman in 2003, losing to **Dorothy Tillman**, who then chose him as Democratic ward committeeman. He is a former government relations director for the Illinois Restaurant Association.

Ken Montoya, 53, **legislative director**

Education: B.A., political science, University of the Pacific; international relations graduate work, San Francisco State University

Background: Most recently the government affairs representative for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Montoya worked previously as a legislative assistant for two Senate-star **Pauls**, **Simon** (D-Ill.) and **Wellstone** (D-Minn.)

Brady King, 43, **chief of staff**

Education: B.A., history, Texas A&M; M.A., history, Baylor, Waco, Tex.; Ph.D. candidate, political science, Temple, Philadelphia, Pa.

Background: King has often worked with Congressional freshmen since arriving on Capitol Hill in 1992 as appropriations adviser to **U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards** (D-Tex.). Since then he's worked as the legislative director for **Rep. Allen Boyd** (D-Fla., then new to Congress) and defense policy adviser to **Senator Edward Kennedy** (D-Mass.).

BUDGET

BRIDGE TO NOWHERE

If you think stimulus spending on infrastructure is going to shorten your commute, you're in the wrong lane.

BY KATHERINE HAJDUCH

MAYBE YOU WERE one of the dreamers parked in the express lane on the Dan Ryan, listening to news radio during your morning drive, hearing talk of the stimulus spending going to roads and trains, and you thought, *Wow! Wider roads, new highways, more and faster trains—traffic might finally get better!* Well, sorry.

The \$935 million in federal stimulus money filling the coffers of the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) will be directed to "shovel-ready" projects—those that can start immediately—and IDOT's shovel-ready projects are mostly maintenance work. "A majority of projects selected from this region for the ARRA program [the American Re-

covery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, a.k.a. the stimulus package] are resurfacing projects and bridge rehabilitation projects," says Pete Harmet, of IDOT. "These are projects that have had plans completed and did not require additional engineering or land acquisition to allow for implementation."

Of the \$693 million IDOT has designated for specific projects, the largest sum for Cook County, \$21.11 million, is to reconstruct the 2.3 miles of 159th Street between the Tri-State and Halsted. The next greatest sum, \$10.9 million, will go toward resurfacing the Bishop Ford east of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive to 130th Street. Similarly, Will County will receive \$28 million for noise barriers, and DuPage County plans to use \$4.04 million for road resurfacing.

Large-scale traffic solutions have been stuck in neutral for several years, largely because the state has not passed a capital-spending bill. A recent study by the traffic-information company INRIX

revealed that the average delay in the Chicago area is the third worst in the country. On average, what would be a 45-minute trip traffic-free takes 54. During the week's peak travel hour, Thursdays between 5 and 6 p.m., that trip takes just over an hour. Big infrastructure projects that would untie major traffic snarls can take as much as ten years of planning.

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"The stimulus needs to be spent quickly, and the quickest work that can be done is resurfacing and rehab projects," says James LaBelle of the civic interest not-for-profit Metropolitan 2020. No Circle Line el. No Eisenhower carpool lanes. No freeway from Evanston to O'Hare.

So as you're sitting in the construction traffic from all this road resurfacing, still grinding your teeth, repeat to yourself that maintenance actually can ultimately reduce congestion. "When you have a road riddled with potholes, you can't go very fast," LaBelle says. ■



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