Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon won't seek re-election

February 13, 2013

Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon made it crystal clear Wednesday that her political future won't include re-election next year, but she was more mysterious about what office she might seek instead, playing up her legal and fiscal background.

The potential nod at Illinois' attorney general, comptroller or treasurer comes as the 2014 governor's race is heating up and some of those officeholders are mulling a challenge against Gov. Pat Quinn. Attorney General Lisa Madigan said Wednesday she still hasn't decided.

Simon, 51, repeatedly declined to give details about her political future during a three-minute news conference, instead touting her law-related background and accomplishments: Pro bono lawyer, prosecutor and fiscally-prudent lieutenant governor among them. The Carbondale Democrat said she'd make an announcement in the coming months and was keeping her options open.

"I have always been an advocate for Illinois," she said. "I anticipate that I will be in public service running for office."

Political experts said the move points toward a possible run for attorney general, comptroller or treasurer, all of which are seen as stepping stones to higher office in Illinois, unlike lieutenant governor. But Simon's choice of which office to run for would depend on how the gubernatorial race shapes up.

"The fulcrum is Lisa Madigan," said longtime political strategist Don Rose. "It all depends on her."

Challenging Madigan would be unwise, he said. Madigan is a popular three-term Democrat who's been in the national spotlight for advocacy on fair housing and the banking industry. Also, her father, House Speaker Michael Madigan, is head of the state's Democratic Party.

However, if she steps down to run for governor, the number of candidates running to replace her is expected to be large.

Madigan has declined publicly to discuss her plans.

"I have not made up my mind yet about what I'm going to do," she told reporters Wednesday.
A number of Republicans — State Sen. Bill Brady, Sen. Kirk Dillard, Treasurer Dan Rutherford and U.S. Rep. Aaron Schock among them — have said they're thinking about challenging Quinn, who says he's ready to seek re-election. Former White House chief of staff Bill Daley, a Democrat, said he's also mulling a primary challenge.

Simon gave no clues about why she decided to make her announcement now and with such few details.

But campaign and political experts said announcing early allows Simon to fundraise separately from Quinn.

The Democratic governor has seen his approval ratings dip over the past months and been scrutinized by Republicans and his own party for being unable to broker an agreement on a pension overhaul, his top priority for more than a year.

"If she carries any baggage, it is that she is lieutenant governor under a governor who has mixed reception across the state," said Alan Gitelson, a Loyola University political science professor

Simon offers name recognition, popularity as a downstate Democrat and wisely used her office to travel statewide, experts say. She is the daughter of the late U.S. Sen. Paul Simon, worked as an assistant state's attorney in Jackson County and taught law at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.

"She has her sights set on being her own person," said Paul Green, a political science professor at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

Simon said she told Quinn her decision in December.

He said Wednesday that he did not consider it as an insult that she was leaving and did not persuade her to stay.

"She told me she had pretty much thought about this and had other ambitions so I accept that," he told reporters at an unrelated event.

In Illinois, the office of lieutenant governor hasn't been seen as a stepping stone to the state's highest office, with the recent exception of Quinn.

He inherited the job after ex-Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who last year began serving a 14-year federal prison sentence for political corruption, was impeached and removed from office in 2009. Former Republican Gov. George Ryan, who was recently released from prison for wide-ranging corruption convictions, served as lieutenant governor then secretary of state before he was elected governor in 1998.

The official duties of lieutenant governor are few and state officials have even considered eliminating the office all together. Until 2011, candidates ran on separate tickets from the governor. The change followed the short-lived nomination of pawn shop owner Scott Lee Cohen,
who dropped out at the urging of Democratic officials after accusations of domestic abuse, steroid abuse and more went public.

Democratic officials put Simon on the ballot in 2010, even though her campaign experience was limited. She ran unsuccessfully for Carbondale's mayor.

Since she took office as lieutenant governor, Simon has made education among her top issues and visited each of the state's 48 community colleges. She also recently focused on gun control, forming a working group on the issue with new lawmakers.