

September 6, 2004 Monday

**Campaign donations follow meetings with Blagojevich;**

**But gov says checks don't buy state contracts, face-time**

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD -- They are not household names in Illinois, but people like Avy Stein and Bruce Liimatainen have an ability many Illinoisans do not: getting face-time with Gov. Blagojevich.

Stein runs an investment equity firm and Liimatainen a North Side steel plant that once employed the governor's father, but they also happen to be big campaign donors to the governor, which may explain their ability to show up on his office calendar.

Their names, along with others, appear in Blagojevich scheduling documents that were obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times through a series of Freedom of Information Act requests covering his 20 months in office.

During that time, Blagojevich spent large amounts of time meeting individually with rank-and-file legislators, doing dozens of media interviews, huddling with his staff and paid consultants and presiding over bill-signing ceremonies.

Amid all that, he also made time for his political benefactors -- including some with state contracts -- who would be penciled in on his schedule, and a five-figure donation would arrive in his campaign fund days or weeks after their visits.

That even happened in instances where Blagojevich promised to meet with certain donors but at the last minute had to cancel, like last October when he went to New York City to push for legalized prescription drug imports.

Before abruptly flying back to Chicago to attend a memorial for victims of the Cook County Administration Building fire, Blagojevich had scheduled meetings in New York with executives of the Bank of New York, Wexford Health Services and Maximus Inc.

**Contracts follow contributions**

Within days of their scheduled meetings, Wexford and Maximus each contributed $10,000 to the governor's campaign fund, while the Bank of New York executive did so in his own name. Early this year, Wexford got a $114 million contract to take care of sick Illinois prison inmates, and Maximus got a $214,000 deal to assess the size of the state vehicle fleet. Both had other existing state contracts, and the administration said their new deals were competitively bid.

Blagojevich and his aides insisted that juicy state contracts aren't contingent on campaign contributions and say they are "scrupulous" in making sure there isn't a price tag attached to a private audience with a governor who has set campaign fund-raising records.

As long as Blagojevich didn't solicit the money on state property or with state resources -- and he says he didn't -- there's nothing illegal here.

But his office schedules show several examples where donors got face-time with him, then got out their checkbooks, helping boost his political war chest to its current level of more than $10 million.

In July 2003, Blagojevich's schedule shows he met with longtime Democratic donor Fred Eychaner. Within three days, according to state election records, he received $50,000 from Eychaner, chief executive of Newsweb Corp., roughly a quarter of the $201,000 he has received from Eychaner.

Stein, managing partner of the Chicago investment equity firm Willis Stein Partners, appeared on the governor's May 7, 2004, schedule for a half-hour meeting. A month later, state campaign records show, Stein made a $25,000 contribution to Blagojevich. One of the companies that Stein's firm owns, Troll Communications, has supplied more than $405,000 in textbooks to the state Board of Education since 2000. Of that, nearly $92,000 in state funds were spent on books since Blagojevich became governor, state records show.

And last April, Blagojevich's schedule showed a meeting with Liimatainen, president of A. Finkl & Sons, at the North Side plant. The topic wasn't disclosed, but eight weeks later, the prominent Blagojevich donor gave him $50,000 -- one of the year's largest donations logged by his campaign fund.

In an interview, Blagojevich denied that campaign donors received a leg up on others when it comes to access and said his door is open to anyone, regardless of whether they contribute.

"We're scrupulous," Blagojevich said when asked whether donors get special access. "We prefer not to have them anywhere around that office. It's just the opposite. We're very determined to keep a separation between the government office and the political office. I spend no time doing fund-raising, other than attend events when they're set up."

**'We keep a separation'**

Asked about his state-subsidized trip to New York City, where he had been scheduled to meet with businesses who later contributed to him and won state contracts, he said, "Look, I meet all kinds of people in all kinds of places. I do nothing when it comes to contracts. I stay away from that. I don't want to know it.

Do you meet people who then are successful in the bidding process? I imagine that probably happens from time to time. But we keep a separation and a wall, and we're constantly rethinking on how this stuff works."

Kent Redfield, a political scientist at the University of Illinois at Springfield and director of the campaign-finance watchdog Sunshine Project, said the access some donors have gained in the governor's office doesn't necessarily mesh with the perception the governor has tried to create as a reformer.

"Given the amount of money he's raised and continues to raise, I don't think it's surprising to see that kind of pattern because people who give that kind of money expect a minimum of access," Redfield said. "If you're going to raise that kind of money, people who write $10,000 and $20,000 checks expect something more than a form letter."