

December 16, 2008 Tuesday

Final Edition

**House Opens Hearings; Governor tries to conduct business as usual as impeachment process begins**

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD-The Illinois House grabbed for Gov. Blagojevich's political jugular Monday by opening impeachment proceedings against him amid growing signs he may be burrowing in for a long fight to retain power.

But a bid to block Blagojevich from appointing a Senate successor to President-elect Barack Obama stalled after the House's historic 113-0 vote establishing a special panel to weigh impeachment against the two-term Democratic governor.

The 21-member panel, comprising 12 Democrats and nine Republicans, will begin deliberating immediately and decide whether to recommend impeachment to the full House.

"I treat today's action as a very significant governmental action of the gravest consideration," said House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago), who waited six days after the governor's arrest to start the impeachment ball rolling.

Blagojevich was arrested last week for allegedly scheming to sell the Senate seat to the bidder promising the most campaign cash.

"We ought to move as quickly as possible to correct our problems and to get ourselves on a track where we can do what we're supposed to do for the people of Illinois," Madigan said.

There is nothing in the state Constitution that defines an impeachable offense. But Madigan said the action was designed to address Blagojevich's "abuse of power" and that the governor's constitutional rights to due process and equal protection would be guaranteed.

Madigan refused to set a timetable for getting an impeachment resolution out of the House but said his staff intends to reach out to U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald for his cooperation in the legislative inquiry.

Retiring Senate President Emil Jones (D-Chicago), a legislative ally of Blagojevich, predicted problems if the governor's ouster by the Legislature relies on Fitzgerald's cooperation and hinges on a set of unproven allegations.

"I don't know if the U.S. attorney is going to take his case and bring it to the General Assembly at the same time you have a pending investigation going on. So, that's the problem I see that exists. We've got a dilemma," Jones said. "I don't know how to resolve it."

Blagojevich's newly hired defense lawyer, Edward Genson, indicated he planned to defend the governor during impeachment proceedings. But those pushing the impeachment effort doubted the governor would wind up testifying in Springfield because it could undercut his defense against the federal charges.

The House scuttled plans to set up a special senatorial election. Madigan said a concern was a special election's price tag that ranged anywhere from $30 million to $50 million, to be paid by counties throughout the state.

Meanwhile, Blagojevich signed legislation Monday that would divert proceeds from the state's four top-grossing casinos to racetracks -- a bill that the governor allegedly was trying to leverage for campaign contributions.

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