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**Gov rips Topinka's 'conflict of interest'; Questions treasurer's vote awarding funds to firm tied to Cellini**

By Dave McKinney and Scott Fornek

Staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD – Gov. Blagojevich accused Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka of “an obvious, glaring conflict of interest” Wednesday for voting to award up to $120 million in state pension funds to an investment firm tied to Republican power broker William Cellini.

The GOP treasurer, who is considering a 2006 gubernatorial run against Blagojevich, sits on the State Board of Investment. In March, she participated in a unanimous vote to steer pension funds to Chicago-based Commonwealth Realty Advisors Inc., the Chicago Sun-Times reported Wednesday.

That firm was founded by Cellini, who yielded his 75 percent ownership stake in Commonwealth to two of his children more than a decade ago. The firm is based in the same suite of Chicago offices where several other Cellini companies are located.

In 1995, Topinka offered to write off most of an unpaid state-backed loan a Cellini-led company used to build an unprofitable Springfield hotel, but that deal was blocked by then-Attorney General Jim Ryan. Taxpayers are still owed $27.5 million by Cellini and his partners.

Topinka said she was unaware of any Cellini connections when the Commonwealth vote was cast, but the governor said she should not have participated in the vote given her history with Cellini.

"It's an obvious, glaring conflict of interest at a minimum," Blagojevich said.

Told of Blagojevich's remarks, Topinka's office fired back, accusing the governor of facing a "glaring conflict" of his own tied to the Commonwealth deal, which was recommended by the investment board's top executive, who was installed after Blagojevich became governor.

**Potential rival criticizes donation**

An aide noted that in June -- three months after the Commonwealth vote -- Blagojevich received a $20,000 campaign contribution from the Good Government Council, the political action committee of the Illinois Asphalt Pavement Association, of which Cellini is executive director.

"This appears to be one more example of the pay-to-play practices that are currently the subject of multiple investigations of the Blagojevich administration," said Topinka spokeswoman Carolyn Barry Frost, who urged the governor to return the contribution.

Blagojevich campaign spokesman Pete Giangreco called Topinka's demand "a smokescreen to try to cover up the fact that she has oversight of these pensions, she offered [Cellini] a multimillion-dollar bailout, and she has a direct conflict of interest in this transaction."