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**MSI trial question: Fraud or politics? Jury may get corruption case today**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD-After nearly eight weeks of testimony from more than 40 witnesses, the Management Services of Illinois corruption trial boiled down to two basic questions Monday as lawyers began their closing arguments.

Did the firm, one of Gov. Edgar's biggest campaign donors, wrongly buy influence through gifts to state officials and political donations, then use that influence to defraud taxpayers of at least $ 7.1 million?

Or was the multimillion-dollar deal MSI struck in 1993 with the state Public Aid department the legitimate product of a political system that, in the words of one defense attorney, "stinks"?

A federal jury of seven men and five women -- a panel that includes only one state employee -- may begin deciding today which theory to apply to former MSI partners William Ladd and Michael Martin and ex-Public Aid supervisor Ron Lowder. All face mail fraud and bribery-related charges.

In cutting through the bureaucratic maze presented in the MSI case, Assistant U.S. Attorney Rodger Heaton focused Monday on how political contributions to Edgar and other Republicans, plus well-placed gifts, allowed MSI's owners to cash in on a Public Aid contract and enjoy the trappings of wealth.

"These greedy contractors took every measure of acquiring influence they could and used it to go from being paid a few hundred thousand dollars to over $ 11 million," Heaton told jurors.

"They made themselves millionaires. They got it all: the swimming pools, the tennis courts, the $ 800,000 houses, the $ 2,000-a-month lease payments on a Mercedes, the BMWs, the trips to foreign countries. But, ladies and gentlemen, they got it by fraud," Heaton said.

Ladd's attorney, J. Steven Beckett, argued that MSI's riches were produced through a tried, true and legal marketing strategy that essentially is a way of life for state contractors: schmoozing and shelling out campaign contributions.

"This isn't something that just started with Michael Martin, Bill Ladd or Ron Lowder," Beckett said. "Do you really believe that people in state government and contractors don't go out to lunch together, have drinks, play golf together? Of course, they do.

"We've had a lot of suggestions that our political system stinks, that a lot of people give money to the governor's campaign or other campaigns, and that's somehow wrong," Beckett said later. "But that's not charged in the indictments."

Beckett also focused on a 1994 meeting between MSI's owners, their political consultants and Edgar at a Chicago hotel and ridiculed the governor's memory. Edgar testified he could not recall anything from an encounter that extracted $ 40,000 in cash and $ 100,000 in computer services for the governor's re-election campaign.

"It's interesting Gov. Edgar can't remember that dinner. That's another $ 140,000 dinner to him, just another one of the series that he goes through," Beckett said.

Lowder's attorney, Peter Wise, and Martin's attorney, Patrick Tuite, are expected to finish their closing arguments today. Tuite predicted the case could go to the jury by this afternoon, a view Heaton shared.