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**Fed probe of talks stumps Madigan**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD--House Speaker Michael Madigan said Wednesday he is "befuddled" about why federal investigators are probing the intervention by his office in a labor dispute at Eastern Illinois University last year.

The U.S. attorney's office subpoenaed the Chicago Democrat for documents relating to a meeting he initiated with the university's president and the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 399 to address why union employees at the campus had been working without a contract for almost a year.

Asked what about his involvement might rise to the level of a federal crime, Madigan said, "In my judgment, nothing."

No charges have been filed against anyone, but the U.S. attorney's office in Springfield has issued subpoenas to the university, the Illinois Board of Higher Education and the union.

Federal investigators also have interviewed Loretta Durbin, the wife of U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin. Loretta Durbin is the Springfield lobbyist for Eastern Illinois University, and she scheduled two meetings between the university's former president and the speaker's office.

"The U.S. attorney's office assured me that I was being contacted solely for information and not for any other reason," Loretta Durbin said. "They informed me that I was not a subject or a target of their investigation."

The probe has stumped Republicans and Democrats alike in Springfield because the matter in question is representative of the type of backroom negotiations that typically go on as the Legislature zeroes in on approving a state budget.

Madigan said he saw nothing wrong in bringing together EIU and the labor union, which represents 10 workers at the Charleston campus, given that both sides were operating under a contract that had expired in July 2000, and no progress was being made toward reaching a new agreement.

"It was a meeting like many meetings we do here, where we bring people together who have differences. We ask if they can sit, talk, and maybe find some common ground to reconcile their differences," Madigan said.

The speaker flatly denied that his interest in the contract dispute played any role in Local 399's endorsement of his daughter, Lisa, for attorney general.

"When this all happened," he said, "there was no election."

He also downplayed the significance of receiving the subpoena on March 20, saying his office gets subpoenaed for records "quite routinely." But he did not offer any further elaboration.

EIU issued a statement Thursday, clarifying a spokes-man's denials Wednesday night that the university had been subpoenaed. The statement said the university was asked to provide "records related to the negotiations" and complied, but would not offer any more detail.

A Downstate lawmaker whose legislative district includes the Charleston campus recalled being notified about the dispute last year by university administrators.

"I think it's fair to say they were a little unsettled the speaker's office was contacting them to intervene on labor negotiations for what amounts to 10 people. I think they were surprised by that," said Rep. Dale Righter (R-Mattoon).