

October 30, 2013 Wednesday

**Madigan accuses watchdog of 'agenda' against Dems**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD - Stung by a weekend report on foot soldiers in his political army, House Speaker Michael Madigan delivered a harsh counter punch against a government watchdog group and its head, former broadcaster Andy Shaw, for engaging in a campaign to "impugn the Democratic Party."

Madigan sent a letter on Democratic Party of Illinois letterhead to the 71-member House Democratic caucus and to members of the Democratic State Central Committee bashing Shaw and the Better Government Association for trying to "become a kingmaker in Illinois politics" and "tarnish Democratic candidates."

Obtained Tuesday by the Chicago Sun-Times, the letter is in response to a Sun-Times/BGA report published Sunday about how as many as 29 of the 30 people who circulated nominating petitions for Madigan in the 2012 election cycle had or have government jobs.

That list included Patrick Ward, the employee at the center of a patronage scandal at Metra. Madigan's office sought a raise for Ward at the transit agency but was rebuffed by its former CEO, Alex Clifford.

In his Oct. 24 letter, which is only now arriving in mailboxes but was penned before the Sun-Times/BGA story was even published, Madigan targeted the door-to-door reporting on the project that aimed to verify that every petition circulator, in fact, accurately matched up with names contained on state, county and municipal payroll records, campaign-finance reports and pension records.

"Shaw has turned the organization's focus toward the volunteer work of Illinois citizens who have exercised their First Amendment rights by circulating nominating petitions for me in previous years. The organization has gone so far as to harass these individuals at their homes," Madigan wrote.

"Rather than work for positive change and reform in Illinois government, Andy Shaw has resorted to using bullying tactics against working men and women in an attempt to suggest they have done something improper," the speaker and state Democratic Party chairman said. "The only thing these men and women have done is work to provide for their families while exercising their constitutional right to support Democratic candidates for office."

In the letter, the speaker also questioned Shaw's "self-admitted improper endorsement" in 2010 of Cook County assessor candidate Forrest Claypool, the BGA's lobbying efforts in Springfield and support the group has received from "my political opponents and opponents of the Democratic Party."

A Madigan spokesman later singled out conservative GOP activist Jack Roeser as one example of an anti-Madigan donor. However, the BGA has gotten funding and support from a broad political spectrum, including wealthy Democratic activists such as J.B. Pritzker and Fred Eychaner.

In response to the letter, Shaw issued a short statement, defending the work he and his organization have done.

"The BGA is a nonpartisan watchdog organization that investigates public officials and public policies, and recommends reforms.  We've been doing it for 90 years and sometimes our work makes people uncomfortable. Our only agenda is better government. We invite everyone, including Mike Madigan, to join us in this effort."

The Sun-Times/BGA report that bore down on Madigan's nominating petitions also found that the speaker's circulators:

--In many case hold jobs for which politics isn't supposed to be a factor in hiring, including sanitation laborer, plumber, truck driver, cashier and court reporter.

--Collectively were being paid roughly $2 million a year in their government jobs as of 2012.

--In some instances - Ward, for example - are drawing a government paycheck and a public pension at the same time.

--Contributed more than $200,000 altogether to political funds for Madigan or his daughter, Attorney General Lisa Madigan.