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Final Edition

**Did Gov break vow to help church?**

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Staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD-Three days after Chicago's historic Pilgrim Baptist Church was gutted by a fire in 2006, [Gov. Blagojevich](http://www.nexis.com/search/XMLCrossLinkSearch.do?bct=A&risb=21_T21557438884&returnToId=20_T21557488441&csi=11064&A=0.8514192769805516&sourceCSI=162599&indexTerm=%23PE0009ULK%23&searchTerm=Gov.%20Blagojevich%20&indexType=P) pledged $1 million in state funds to help rebuild the Bronzeville architectural gem.

Blagojevich made his election-year commitment to the ''rebuilding of the Pilgrim Baptist Church'' by stressing the money would have to go toward fixing a destroyed, adjoining church building that housed offices and classroom space but wasn't used for religious services.

But in March 2007, that money instead went to a private school that leased space from Pilgrim Baptist but has no other church affiliation. No state money has come to rebuild the charred administrative and school building, as Blagojevich promised, prompting church leaders and at least one state lawmaker to question whether Blagojevich had lived up to his word.

''I still can't believe it. We aren't trying to have a fight with the governor or anything like that, but how can he let this thing happen?'' said Robert Vaughn, chairman of Pilgrim Baptist's board of trustees, who didn't learn of the school grant until after being contacted by the Chicago Sun-Times.

The Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity routed the $1 million grant to Loop Lab School, a private, pre-K through eighth-grade school that has since moved from its burned-out quarters, taking with it money intended to rebuild the destroyed church complex.

''What it says to me is that it gets to the point where promises really don't mean anything,'' said Rep. Elga Jefferies (D-Chicago), whose South Side district takes in the charred church.

''That's about the bottom line. If you don't produce, then you come to be labeled as a person not of your word,'' she said.

Blagojevich's administration said last week the allotment to Loop Lab School fulfilled the governor's pledge to help the church.

But by late Sunday, aware of criticism from lawmakers and church leaders, the administration changed its tune and was scrambling to figure out what exactly had been negotiated between the state and church.

"In revisiting the situation, it seems that there may have been some miscommunication among some of the parties involved. We recently reached out to the church and hope to work out the issue with them,'' Blagojevich spokeswoman Abby Ottenhoff said.

The church's stone walls have been reinforced, but the interior remains gutted. An adjoining building that housed the church's administrative offices and once was home to Loop Lab School is in ruin. Repair costs for the church, which was designed in 1890 by famed Chicago architect Louis Sullivan, have been estimated at $10 million.

Almost immediately after Blagojevich had promised $1 million to assist Pilgrim Baptist, concerns arose from the American Civil Liberties Union and others about funneling public dollars to a religious group.

Church officials said they were told state money couldn't be used to repair the church but learned from the administration it could be used to reconstruct the adjoining building with office space and classrooms.

That was the last Pilgrim Baptist heard from the administration.

Ottenhoff did not say how exactly the administration intends to live up to the governor's promise of state help to rebuild Pilgrim Baptist, a deal overseen by two senior Blagojevich staffers no longer with the administration. Ottenhoff refused to name them publicly.

''We need to figure out what happened and what the options are. It's hard for me to say at this point what can happen until we've had a chance to revisit this,'' she said.

The $1 million state grant to Loop Lab School was earmarked for ''all costs associated with space/land acquisition,'' state contracting documents show.

The school intended to use the money to purchase a commercial condominium at 318 W. Adams St. and convert that into a school, records show. Efforts to reach Elmira Mayes, the school's director, were unsuccessful.

Cynthia Jones, a Pilgrim Baptist trustee, said she is unclear how diverting money to Loop Lab School benefitted the church or met Blagojevich's promise to help the church.

''We have not received any money," Jones said. ''That is the bottom line.''

''Why would that money be given to someone else when it was promised to our church?'' she said.

Jones said Loop Lab School rented a building from the church but had no affiliation. After the church and school building caught fire in 2006, the church had no further contact with the school except to help them move out.

Jefferies and others drew parallels between the administration's failure to help Pilgrim Baptist recover from its spectacular fire and the headline-grabbing offer Blagojevich made last week to help Northern Illinois University heal from its February campus massacre.

The governor pledged to help raise $40 million in state funds to demolish the campus building where a gunman shot and killed five students before killing himself -- a controversial commitment the governor offered without first clearing a way through the Legislature.

''I am deeply concerned, especially since he has offered this money to Northern,'' Jefferies said. ''I'm concerned about the promises he says he's going to keep.''

Ottenhoff said there are ''plenty of cases where the governor has said he wanted to provide money to address a certain problem that he's encountered along the way and we've done so.''

One example she cited was the controversial $3 million commitment he made to a campaign donor to help build a minor-league baseball stadium in Downstate Marion.

But Sen. Christine Radogno (R-Lemont) said the promises made to Pilgrim Baptist Church are characteristic of Blagojevich and ought to give pause to those at NIU wanting state money to raze Cole Hall.

''In both instances, the governor took a tragedy and just came in and attempted to portray himself as the rescuer. The guy is a complete opportunist,'' she said.

''He has absolutely no shame about using any kind of difficult situation or tragedy to make himself look good.''