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**'5-alarm fire'; As it wraps up its case against Gov, impeachment panel hears how he got 435 contributions of $25,000 or more**

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD-Awaiting direction from federal prosecutors, the House impeachment panel all but wrapped up its case against Gov. Blagojevich on Monday and is prepared to give his lawyer the chance next week to show why the governor shouldn't be ousted from office.

The House Special Investigative Committee still had not heard whether U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald would provide secret recordings of the governor or sign off on a list of witnesses to testify before the panel that could be part of the government's prosecution of Blagojevich.

Absent that, the committee spent its fifth day focusing on Blagojevich's well-oiled fund-raising machine, which is at the heart of criminal allegations that he was dangling Illinois' open U.S. Senate seat to the highest political bidder.

Cynthia Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, told the committee that Blagojevich had raised more five-figure donations than his two predecessors combined and his alleged appetite for donations ramped up as new fund-raising restrictions were about to take hold Jan. 1.

"It was a little like handing an arsonist the keys to a gas station and saying you would return in six months. The people of Illinois and indeed the world are now viewing the five-alarm fire that has resulted," she said.

Her group disclosed that the governor's campaign took in 435 contributions of $25,000 or more during the past eight years. That constituted a third of the $58.3 million he raised during the period.

By comparison, now-imprisoned former Gov. George Ryan had 35 contributions of $25,000 or more over a six-year span, and former Gov. Jim Edgar took in only eight contributions in excess of $25,000 during his last six years in office.

Canary highlighted reporting by the Chicago Tribune and Chicago Sun-Times to "connect the dots" about how much of that campaign money seemed to precede decisions by the Blagojevich administration to hand out plum appointments or contracts for those in the "$25,000 club."

She referred specifically to a 2005 Sun-Times report -- the first major newspaper investigation into pay-to-play allegations under Blagojevich. That analysis showed how 20 companies, which gave a combined $925,000 to Friends of Blagojevich, had been paid or were under contract for $365 million by state government.

"She raises the circumstantial question does this all pass the smell test," said House Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie (D-Chicago), chairwoman of the panel.

The cornerstone of the impeachment case being built against Blagojevich is a 76-page criminal complaint that contains profanity-laced excerpts of the governor, first lady Patti Blagojevich and staffers allegedly scheming to sell President-elect Obama's former Senate seat and to shake down the Chicago Tribune for more generous coverage on the newspaper's editorial page.

But Blagojevich lawyer Ed Genson, who disputes the legality of the wiretap and its use as evidence in the Legislature, said he has yet to hear anything that merits impeaching Blagojevich, who has vowed not to resign.

"It's heavy on inference," Genson said of the case being assembled against the governor by the House. "It's still my position . . . that that [criminal] complaint is not usable. It's not complete. It's not whole. It doesn't show a crime. But more importantly, the inclusions of the supposed wiretap are illegal.

"Without that," Genson continued, "we have a lot of differences of opinion about how persons do or should run government."

The committee will resume next Monday. Genson has tentatively been given the day to present the governor's case. He said he has a list of nine potential witnesses he may call, but refused to identify them.