

May 2, 2008 Friday

Final Edition

**105-0: House OKs audit of gov's $1 mil. church pledge; School, not Pilgrim Baptist, got cash**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD-The Illinois House voted unanimously Thursday to direct the state's top auditor to probe Gov. Blagojevich's mistaken $1 million award to a clout-heavy private school.

Involvement by Auditor General William Holland in the Loop Lab School deal now marks the third state investigation into the deal since the Chicago Sun-Times first reported in March about how the school inexplicably got money the governor had pledged for the rebuilding of fire-ravaged Pilgrim Baptist Church.

Thursday's vote, pushed by Rep. Jack Franks (D-Woodstock), was 105-0 and comes one month after Deputy Gov. Louanner Peters refused to answer almost 60 questions about the deal before a legislative hearing Franks chaired.

"They know exactly who did it, exactly what happened and exactly under what circumstances, and they refuse to tell the truth," Rep. Lou Lang (D-Skokie) said. "If it isn't that, then it's the grossest amount of incompetence I've ever seen under any administration I've served under."

On the day the Sun-Times broke the story in March, Blagojevich called the deal a "bureaucratic mix-up" he blamed on two former gubernatorial staffers. He promised an additional $1 million to the church, which it has not gotten two months later.

At the urging of the Rev. Jesse Jackson and U.S. Rep. Danny Davis (D-Ill.), the school's director, Chandra Gill, obtained a pardon from Blagojevich for a felony aggravated battery conviction in which a Downstate off-duty police officer was beaten. The pardon came shortly before the school got the state money that was used last year to purchase space for classrooms that still have not opened.

Attorney General Lisa Madigan and the state Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity are also investigating.

Blagojevich spokeswoman Abby Ottenhoff said the investigation is ongoing. "We will share relevant findings with the auditor general's office if they're conducting a management audit. We are close to working out details with Pilgrim Baptist on their grant."