

December 17, 2008 Wednesday

Final Edition

**On the fast track; House seeks help from feds, gov's camp rips speed**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD--An Illinois House panel Tuesday began its ramp-up toward the possible impeachment of Gov. Blagojevich with a request to U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald for help and a complaint from a Blagojevich lawyer who said the governor's rights are being violated by the fast-moving process.

The Democratic co-chair of the House Special Investigative Committee, Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie, said Fitzgerald had been consulted Monday about making witnesses and other evidence from his probe available to the panel. Currie said it was not clear to what extent Fitzgerald would cooperate but that he would consider the request.

Today, the 21-member panel will focus on the criminal complaint against Blagojevich, which Fitzgerald made public last week, and previous federal plea agreements with convicted Blagojevich donors Ali Ata and Joseph Cari -- a first step in what Currie promised would be a deliberative process. "We do not sentence first and then do the verdict," she said. "Frontier justice will not prevail in this proceeding."

Pending Fitzgerald's approval, Currie said the committee might call as witnesses Ata, who admitted giving the governor $25,000 in exchange for a high-paying state post; former Deputy Gov. Robert Greenlee, who allegedly participated in discussions with Blagojevich about plans to appoint a successor to President-elect Barack Obama, and John Harris, who resigned as Blagojevich's chief of staff after being charged last week along with the governor with scheming to sell Obama's former Senate seat to the highest bidder.

Currie said Blagojevich defense lawyer Edward Genson intends to be at today's committee hearing.

Another Blagojevich lawyer, Sheldon Sorosky, criticized the fast-moving impeachment process and, in particular, a Monday invitation from the committee for the governor to attend today's hearing. "By giving the governor and his counsel such short notice to be present before the Special Committee, the governor's right to due process is being violated,'' Sorosky wrote.

In the Senate, lawmakers began gearing up for Blagojevich's possible impeachment, voting 56-0 to form a special committee to establish rules governing the process.

Incoming Senate President John Cullerton (D-Chicago) said the nine-member panel would delve into the burden of proof necessary to convict Blagojevich in an impeachment trial.

"The Constitution doesn't give us much direction other than to say we should 'do justice under the law,' " Cullerton said.

Republicans railed about the death of a plan to set up a special election to fill Obama's Senate seat. After Blagojevich was arrested, Obama, Lt. Pat Quinn, Madigan and retiring Senate President Emil Jones called for such an election. But party leaders quietly backed off that idea because Republicans could be in a strong position to capture the seat because of voter discontent with Blagojevich.

With the status of the Senate seat up in the air, Blagojevich or Quinn -- if the governor resigns -- could appoint a successor and keep the seat in Democratic hands.