

October 15, 2011 Saturday

**Cellini trial tape reveals millionaire rattled in alleged extortion**

By Dave McKinney and Natasha Korecki

Staff reporters

Federal jurors on Friday heard a usually in-control power broker sounding like a "nervous wreck" in a recorded phone call in which he relays an alleged pay-to-play conversation he had with a Hollywood film producer.

Springfield millionaire William Cellini, who is on trial, sounded rattled on tape describing an angered Tom Rosenberg, who produced "Million Dollar Baby" and "Lincoln Lawyer" in what prosecutors contend was an attempted extortion by Cellini.

"I mean, the more he talked the angrier he got," Cellini told Stuart Levine in a May 8, 2004, phone call.

Cellini at one point tells Levine: "I'm a nervous wreck about it myself."

Cellini, whose lawyer began an intense cross-examination of Levine on Friday, is charged with conspiring with Levine and two fund-raisers to former Gov. Rod Blagojevich - Chris Kelly and Tony Rezko.

Cellini, 76, is accused of passing on a message to Rosenberg that he was expected to cough up money to Blagojevich's campaign fund if he wanted his investment firm, Capri Capital, to win a $220 million investment from the Teachers' Retirement System.

"He said: 'I don't have a problem, they have a real problem.'" Cellini tells Levine, then, a TRS board member, recounting what he said Rosenberg told him. "I'm outraged, I'll take them down," Rosenberg said of Rezko and Kelly, according to Cellini's on-tape recollection.

The recording was among the last prosecutors played while questioning Levine, their key witness in the case.

Cellini's lawyer, former U.S. Attorney Dan Webb, quickly began his verbal bludgeoning of Levine, an admitted swindler, defrauder and drug-user, before jurors left for the weekend.

Webb quickly contrasted Levine's admitted decades of committing crimes with the allegations against Cellini, which span a matter of days in May 2004.

The courtroom sat in silence as Levine, often staring off into the distance, tried to count the number of crimes he committed in the last 20 years. "Is it fair to say there's so many, you can't give us an estimate of the actual total?" Webb asked.

"No," Levine said. He later said he thought he defrauded five organizations over the last two decades.

Webb was just beginning his work to strike at the credibility and memory of the longtime drug user before the weekend break.

Earlier in the day, Levine explained he, Kelly and Rezko chose Cellini to make the initial contact with Rosenberg to relay a vague demand that campaign contributions to Blagojevich would be expected before TRS would remove "a brick" that had been put on the $220 million investment deal.

Ultimately, Cellini, who, according to testimony wielded significant control over TRS, was supposed to have arranged to have Rosenberg speak with Levine, who then would deliver specific details of the scheme: that Rosenberg either make a $1.5 million contribution to Blagojevich or pay a $2 million "finder's fee" to Levine associate and former Ald. Edward Vrdolyak before getting state approval on the investment deal.

"I acted like I was an innocent, know-nothing guy on the sidelines who was worried this maneuver would be harmful to me and what I was doing," Cellini tells Levine on a May 8, 2004, recording as he began recounting the earlier discussion with Rosenberg.

But Cellini reported that things immediately turned sour with Rosenberg as the producer went into a full-bore "tirade."

"I'll take them down,'" Cellini quotes Rosenberg as saying at one point, referring to Kelly and Rezko. "They've been advertising themselves as fixers, and the government knows what they are doing."

Later in the lengthy discussion, Cellini asks Rosenberg what he wants of him.

"He said, 'Whoever you were talking to, by God, let them know they got a problem.' I said. ... I'd do that," Cellini says on the tape.

Rattled by Rosenberg's rebuke, Cellini and Levine were convinced that the producer intended to go to federal authorities with the scheme, according to the recording. Levine warned that the best response would be to not seek a contribution from Rosenberg and let his $220 million deal languish.

But Cellini had a different idea on the tapes. He suggests TRS give Rosenberg's company a $20 million allocation that might help keep the producer quiet.