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**Defense argues Cellini not involved in extortion scheme**

By Natasha Korecki and Dave McKinney

Staff reporters

The defense in the corruption trial of millionaire power broker William Cellini got to the heart of its case Tuesday, asserting that he wasn't the mastermind nor even a knowing participant in a scheme to extort a Hollywood producer for campaign contributions to ex-Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

Cellini lawyer Dan Webb hammered away at government witness Stuart Levine by painstakingly going word-for-word through secretly recorded phone calls that prosecutors said were damning, asking Levine to pinpoint precisely where Cellini told Levine he'd conveyed to Rosenberg that a $1.5 million contribution to Blagojevich was a condition for Rosenberg getting a $220 million state investment deal.

"Am I correct that nowhere in this call does Cellini say, 'You have to make a political contribution or you will not get your allocation?'"

"Not his exact words," said Levine, a former member of the state Teachers Retirement System board, from whom Rosenberg's company was seeking the $220 million.

"Where he says something similar to that?" Webb pressed, referring to the transcript of the call.

"No," Levine said.

Levine said he had an understanding of what happened when Cellini and Rosenberg spoke, but Webb cut him off, asking for specific phrasing.

At another point, Webb pressed Levine about him telling Cellini in a call that a "brick" had been placed on Rosenberg's deal because he had "lied" to TRS staff about putting his investment company up for sale - not because he hadn't donated to Blagojevich.

Levine explained that the circumstances involving the potential sale of Rosenberg's company was merely a "cover story" to explain why TRS had not given funds to Rosenberg's firm and to discourage him from telling investigators about the pay-to-play scheme.

"Where did you tell Mr. Cellini this is part of a 'cover story?'" Webb asked.

"Nowhere," Levine answered.

The heart of Webb's defense is that Cellini was "the ham in the ham sandwich," who didn't know about an extortion scheme and never planned to profit off of one.

Webb repeatedly pointed out on Tuesday that it was Levine who devised the plan, it was Levine who had a personal vendetta against Rosenberg, and it was Levine who stood to profit from the scheme or get credit if Rosenberg did ante up to Blagojevich's campaign fund.