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**Jurors hear tape about shakedown; 'I'm sort of flying under the radar here,' Cellini says on secret recording**

By Natasha Korecki and Dave McKinney

Staff reporters

Federal prosecutors Thursday presented the most direct evidence yet that power broker William Cellini allegedly took part in a scheme to force a Hollywood film producer to contribute to ex-Gov. Rod Blagojevich or lose a $220 million state investment deal.

Jurors in Cellini's corruption trial heard a secretly recorded phone call from May 7, 2004, in which Cellini told the government's main witness, Stuart Levine, about producer Tom Rosenberg's initial reaction to getting caught up in the Blagojevich shakedown attempt.

"After that conversation with the defendant on May 7, did you believe the defendant had delivered the message to Rosenberg you asked him to deliver?" prosecutor Chris Niewoehner asked Levine over the objection of defense attorney Dan Webb.

After Judge James Zagel overruled Webb, Levine offered jurors a one-word answer: "Yes."

Prosecutors allege that Cellini had been tabbed by Levine and Blagojevich fund-raisers Tony Rezko and Christopher Kelly to make the initial contact with Rosenberg, the producer of "Million Dollar Baby."

Rosenberg would be given the choice to either donate $1.5 million to Blagojevich or pay Levine associate and former Ald. Edward Vrdolyak a $2 million "finder's fee" before the deal with Rosenberg's investment firm, Capri Capital, would be approved by the state Teachers Retirement System board, of which Levine was a member.

During the secret recording, Cellini tells Levine he had relayed to Rosenberg how "flabbergasted" Rezko and Kelly were about the amount of state business Capri Capital had gotten without donating to Blagojevich.

With Rosenberg displaying an unwillingness to make such a trade­off, Cellini tells Levine, "If Tom feels he'd rather walk away from the money than deal with Tony, there it is," prompting laughter between Cellini and Levine.

Cellini also tells Levine that Rosenberg said the scheme made him "sick at my stomach."

"And I said, 'Well, hey, it sure as hell didn't make me feel too good because I'm sort of flying under the radar here,' " Cellini says on the tape.

Earlier Thursday, federal prosecutors played a taped conversation in which Levine and Cellini are initially heard laughing as they discuss state pension business.

The two sound chummy in the May 12, 2004, phone call as they talk about the very inner workings of the Teachers' Retirement System, including its fee structure and how possible changes could hurt Cellini's Commonwealth Realty.

Cellini's real estate investment firm had won millions of dollars in TRS business over the years and prosecutors contend that Cellini, long a Republican backer, played ball with Levine, Rezko and Kelly so he could keep his financial empire intact.

It was Levine's second day on the witness stand and jurors heard an interminable laundry list of Levine's crime-ridden life including 10-hour drug binges at the Purple Hotel in Lincolnwood; ripping off the estate of a dead friend, and siphoning $6 million from a charity and splitting the money with his longtime partner-in-crime Robert Weinstein, according to his testimony.

Niewoehner asked Levine if he did any work for the $3 million he got from the charity - or whether he paid any of it back.

"No," Levine said.

Levine told Niewoehner why he stalled a $220 million TRS investment to Rosenberg's firm.

"So I'd have time to arrange a bribe with Mr. Rosenberg," he said.

Levine testified that Cellini initially warned of holding up Rosenberg's money.

Cellini described Rosenberg as a "dangerous and vicious man," according to Levine.