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**Out of prison, Cellini lauds Rauner**

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD - Republican Bruce Rauner drew strong words of praise Tuesday from one of the most powerful men Springfield has ever known, but it probably wasn't the kind of endorsement Rauner wants.

Convicted power broker William Cellini gave the GOP candidate for governor high marks after hearing him speak for the first time at a gathering of Sangamon County Republicans Tuesday night in Springfield.

"The first time I heard him tonight," Cellini said when asked his thoughts about Rauner so far in the governor's race and whether he was supporting him. "He was very impressive."

"I've been a Republican all my life, and he's the Republican candidate," Cellini said of Rauner.

Cellini said he backed state Sen. Kirk Dillard, R-Hinsdale, in the four-way Republican primary that Rauner won in March.

Asked what Rauner could do to beat Gov. Pat Quinn in the fall, Cellini alluded to the candidate's speech when telling the Chicago Sun-Times and an Illinois Public Radio reporter "if you had your mic on, you probably got them all."

Once dubbed the "King of Clout," Cellini, 79, was released from federal prison last November after serving nearly 11 months for his role in a fund-raising scheme designed to benefit former Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

The extortion plot was hatched with convicted influence peddler Stuart Levine in order to shake down Hollywood producer and investment mogul Thomas Rosenberg for a $1.5 million campaign contribution for Blagojevich. On secret government recordings, Levine and Cellini talked about collecting the contribution for Blagojevich in exchange for Levine helping Rosenberg, who owned an investment company, retain state pension business.

Cellini was the longtime treasurer of the Sangamon County Republican Foundation, which played host to Rauner Tuesday at the Sangamon Club, a members-only organization located a few blocks away from the state Capitol.

When told that Cellini described him as "very impressive," Rauner sidestepped a question about whether he welcomed an endorsement from Cellini, who sat near the front of the room during one of Rauner's two speeches.

"I don't know," Rauner answered. "I didn't even know he was here. I don't really know him. I can't comment on that."