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**State set to unload Abe Lincoln hotel; Auction Monday for 'debacle' that's cost taxpayers $30M**

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SPRINGFIELD-The 27-year-old hotel that indicted political power broker William Cellini helped build may finally be off the taxpayers' hands after an auction Monday.

If the bidding goes high enough, a sale of the 316-room Abraham Lincoln Hotel and Conference Center will end what state Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias' office has characterized as a "political and financial debacle" that cost the state nearly $30 million since the hotel was constructed in 1982.

Giannoulias, who took control of the hotel in 2008, has set a minimum amount he would like to see the hotel fetch but does not intend to divulge that reserve price. If the threshold is not met, Giannoulias has said he will pull the hotel off the market.

So far, about 30 groups have purchased background material on the hotel, and 15 of those groups have toured the hotel, Giannoulias spokesman Scott Burnham said.

A Cellini-led consortium obtained a $15.5 million state backed-loan in the early 1980s but soon fell behind on mortgage payments.

In 1990, Cellini persuaded former Gov. James Thompson and then-Treasurer Jerome Cosentino to restructure the deal in a highly controversial move so that repayments on the loan needed to be only made when the hotel turned a profit. Regular payments to the state stopped in 1997.

When Giannoulias took control of the hotel in 2008, the amount owed on the loan had jumped to $30 million with interest accruing at a rate of $70,000 per month.

Giannoulias has collected on a $5.65 million surety bond that the hotel's original owners purchased to collateralize a portion of the state's loan. The sale proceeds would build upon that amount.

"The hotel sale will happen in the open, unlike the unethical practices and influence-peddling that hatched this scheme behind closed doors," Giannoulias said. "Taxpayers will reap the profits of the sale, and the Abe Lincoln Hotel will finally have the chance to serve as the economic engine that downtown Springfield deserves."

Once known as the Ramada Renaissance Hotel, the all-brick building six blocks from the Capitol has turned a $1.3 million profit since Giannoulias took control.

The ground-floor lobby, restaurant and bar have been updated, and new mattresses have been put in guest rooms. But the rooms are still dog-eared; some have had the same drapes, carpeting and bathroom fixtures since the hotel opened.

While heading the hotel, Cellini outfitted guest rooms with a curved shower curtain bar -- a standard now in most hotel bathrooms -- for which he obtained a patent.

On Feb. 10, 2007, then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama spent the night at the hotel on the eve of his announcement the next day at the Old State Capitol that he intended to run for president.

Unrelated to the hotel deal, Cellini faces federal charges in an alleged scheme to extort a company seeking state pension business for campaign contributions to former Gov. Rod Blagojevich.