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**Scandal edges up to Edgar;**

**MSI owner says aides covered up role in deal**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD-Convicted MSI owner Michael Martin aimed squarely at Gov. Edgar's office Friday, accusing the governor's top aides of covering up the truth about how they signed off on the firm's scandal-tainted 1993 state contract.

"I believe the governor's office conspired to lay the blame on MSI when this became a political liability. That's my belief," Martin said during a dramatic day of testimony at the corruption trial of Deputy Public Aid Director James Berger.

In his first full day on the witness stand, Martin launched a barrage of political bombshells aimed at Edgar's upper echelon, a onetime Management Services of Illinois consultant turned enemy and the family of GOP power broker William Cellini.

In reaction, Edgar's office angrily dispatched some of its harshest rhetoric yet, pointing out that it had launched the MSI investigation.

"It's not surprising that this vengeful little felon would lash out at the Edgar administration since it was the governor's office that helped blow the whistle on his bribery scheme to defraud the taxpayers," Edgar spokesman Thomas Hardy said.

Martin told jurors: During Edgar's 1993 statewide flyaround to announce his re-election plans, Janis Cellini -- William Cellini's sister and a top aide to Edgar -- arranged a meeting among Martin, MSI consultant Terry Bedgood and Berger to talk about renegotiating MSI's Public Aid contract. That 1993 renegotiation ultimately led to at least $ 7.1 million in improper state payments to MSI.

Earlier this week, Edgar scoffed at the notion that any of his aides would have had time to divert their attention from the daylong campaign event in November, 1993, to discuss the pact while aboard his re-election plane. Martin said the conversation with Janis Cellini took place on the tarmac of the Rockford airport.

Former Edgar aide Mike Belletire discussed terms of the contract with Martin four weeks after the campaign event while both attended an MSI Christmas party at a Springfield country club. Two weeks later, Belletire called Martin to tell him he was directing former Public Aid Director Robert Wright to approve the contract.

Belletire, who has not been charged, has said he had no hand in the "details" of the pact.

Bedgood, a onetime close friend of Edgar's, said he "owned" Berger and refused to recommend him as state prison chief when the job opened up in 1995 because that "would not be very . . . beneficial to MSI."

Bedgood claimed that a $ 4.55 million windfall for MSI, for work the company already had been paid for but that was guaranteed as part of the renegotiation, was spread out in weekly payments in 1994 to prevent former state Comptroller Dawn Clark Netsch from making the deal an issue in her Democratic run against Edgar for governor.

Bedgood, who has not been charged, ultimately had a falling out with Martin and MSI.

Martin also said that Andy Foster, campaign manager in the 1994 re-election campaign and now Edgar's deputy chief of staff, talked about renegotiations for the MSI contract. Martin said Foster "assured me that the governor would be made aware of (the contract renegotiation) and that if there were any problems, they'd be more than happy to help."

Martin, convicted of mail fraud and bribery last summer and facing eight to 11 years in prison, is a star government witness against Berger.