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**Metra severance analysis**

**Speaker's troubles could derail Lisa's plans**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD - To get an idea of how bad House Speaker Michael Madigan's week has been, consider that the worst part of it wasn't even having his legislative paycheck yanked by Gov. Pat Quinn in a fit of gubernatorial pique over the state's pension stalemate.

Madigan took a bigger hit in getting slammed with perhaps the greatest ethics quandary he's faced in more than a decade, a narrative that puts him in the center of alleged hiring improprieties, a $700,000 golden parachute, and political strong-arming at Metra.

The transit agency's ex-CEO, Alex Clifford, initially endured public scorn over his gold-plated severance deal but over the past few days has seemingly morphed into a victim.

Clifford claimed in a confidential memo released Friday that he lost his job, and that at least two board members feared the possibility of having the agency's funding slashed because of Clifford's refusal to accede to the speaker's demands to hike the pay of a Madigan campaign worker employed at Metra and to hire another political friend of the powerful Southwest Side Democrat.

The bombshell threatens damage to the Madigan brand, both in terms of political embarrassment to the speaker and an ill-timed stink bomb that now clouds the possible gubernatorial ambitions of his daughter, Attorney General Lisa Madigan, who has said she is "seriously considering" taking on Quinn in 2014.

The three-term attorney general is mentioned only once in Clifford's explosive eight-page memo and is not accused of any possible ethics lapses, as her father is in Clifford's account.

The speaker has acknowledged relaying to Metra his request for a pay raise for campaign worker, Patrick Ward, who Clifford said made thousands of dollars in political contributions spread between a Madigan-controlled campaign fund and Lisa Madigan's fund.

But the speaker's camp denied any wrongdoing and dismissed the allegations in the memo as the rants of an administrator who didn't "[know] anything about railroads."

"Somebody asked for help. That's what public officials do, day in and day out," Madigan spokesman Steve Brown said, referring to Ward. "People ask for help."

But Clifford described it less benignly in his memo, claiming that Madigan, through a Metra lobbyist and in a direct conversation with a Metra Board member, asked for a raise for Ward.

The speaker last faced serious ethical questions in 2002, when his office was subpoenaed by federal investigators for records surrounding a series of taxpayer-funded bonuses to staffers who later went to work on campaigns, including Lisa Madigan's first run for attorney general. Nothing came of that federal investigation, which was first reported by the Chicago Sun-Times.

Over his long career, Madigan also has emerged unscathed from a series of media investigations - most recently, a Chicago Tribune expose Madigan derided as "garbage" that delved into potential conflicts of interest in the cross-pollination of Madigan's law practice and dual role as House speaker and chairman of the state Democratic Party.

With Madigan's grip on power as firm as ever, Brown predicted the speaker would weather the Metra scandal unscathed.

"There's nothing there, so this is sort of like all those Tribune headlines. Big headlines. But if you read the stories, there's no point where he's used his office for gain," Madigan spokesman Steve Brown said. "There's nothing really there."

Short of a criminal investigation arising from this case - and there are no signs of that - Brown's assertion that the speaker won't be dislodged is hard to contest. Madigan's remarkable 28-year tenure controlling the House gavel and his chairmanship of the state party have inoculated him from internal opposition within his party, and he has drawn himself into a legislative district as secure as a combination safe.

Despite being attorney general for three terms, Lisa Madigan is in a far more politically sensitive position and moved Friday to distance herself from any collateral damage from the Metra blow-up and her father's involvement. She urged a full investigation by the state's executive inspector general, Ricardo Meza, into Clifford's allegations and pledged full cooperation.

"If the inspector general is investigating, the attorney general has indicated he should do it quickly and thoroughly and get it to a law enforcement agency, including the attorney general if that's the appropriate agency, as soon as possible," said Natalie Bauer, a spokeswoman for the attorney general.

Bauer also addressed the question of how the Metra revelations affect the Madigan brand.

"There is no 'umbrella' Madigan brand," Bauer told the Sun-Times. "Lisa Madigan stands on her own record as an independent public official. There are no allegations made against her in this situation, and if the inspector general wants to refer this matter to our office, we will look at it."

But the attorney general's response just serves to underscore one of her political problems. How can Lisa Madigan's office investigate a matter in which her own father is involved?

Indeed, for the attorney general, this past week's developments could pose more unwelcome political problems. Potentially more hearings of the House Mass Transit Committee, where the scandal has been unfolding, await.

No decisions have been made, but testimony could be sought from an array of players identified in Clifford's memo, including the ex-Metra CEO himself, Madigan-aligned Metra board members, the agency's Springfield lobbyist and perhaps even the speaker.

"As far as whether this could reflect negatively on the attorney general in terms of if she wants to run for governor, the short answer is yes," said Kent Redfield, an emeritus professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

"The more her father is in the news and the more of it that's unfavorable, the more it raises questions about conflicts of interest," he said.

The attorney general has kept her future plans a closely guarded secret, but Redfield said the drip-drop of revelations in the daily news about her father's possible machine-style intervention at Metra could chase Lisa Madigan away from a gubernatorial bid.

"I thought she probably was not going to run, but I think this would make it a certainty if it blows up," Redfield said.

Indeed, the whole unfolding mess at Metra also underscores why Illinois politics is such a spectacular spectator sport - unless your name right now is Madigan.

"It's great entertainment on one level," Redfield said. "I don't know who said it, but there's nothing more fascinating than watching the train wreck unless you have a seat in the club car."