

Lawmakers put off NRI witness testimony to Oct. 8

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A legislative panel unanimously agreed Thursday to hold off compelling testimony from former aides to Gov. Pat Quinn until Oct. 8 in a political compromise that threatens to reignite controversy over the governor's Neighborhood Recovery Initiative just weeks before the fall election.

But even with that break in the acrimony that had deadlocked the bipartisan Legislative Audit Commission, a new political wrinkle appeared Thursday as the panel's ranking Republican accused Quinn's administration of not fully complying with a request to turn over all NRI-related emails from within his office.

The commission voted 11-0 to delay witness testimony in a nod to Springfield-based U.S. Attorney James Lewis, who feared hauling seven subpoenaed witnesses before the panel now could impede an ongoing criminal investigation into the program.

The vote followed a conversation that the co-chairmen of the commission, Rep. Frank Mautino, D-Spring Valley, and Sen. Jason Barickman, R-Bloomington, and their staffs had with Lewis Thursday morning.

On Wednesday, the bipartisan audit panel split along party lines on the question of when or if to compel witness testimony after the Justice Department and Lewis asked the committee to stand down for 90 days.

"We both expressed our intent to comply with the request of the U.S. attorney," Mautino said, "and the manner we'd do this is we would move the date out, respect the 90 days. Eighty days into that, Senator Barickman and I will call and have a discussion with the U.S. attorney to see if either the investigation is done or if there is someone we should not talk to.

"And we'll respect that," Mautino continued. "He and I will jointly make those decisions."

The upshot for Quinn, politically, is not good. A parade of his ex-aides potentially being hauled in front of the audit panel will reacquaint voters with an issue that represents perhaps the governor's gravest political crisis since taking office, and it figures to happen just weeks before the election between Quinn and Republican Bruce Rauner.

In Thursday's conversation with the federal prosecutor in Springfield, Barickman recounted Lewis' assurance that he does not intend to ask the commission to delay witness testimony beyond the 90-day window originally sought by the Justice Department.

"Mr. Lewis informed us again of his commitment to a 90-day period to complete the activities he is attempting to complete. He made that very clear that he doesn't anticipate a request for extensions," Barickman said.

"He stated on the phone call his intention is certainly not to impede any of the work we're trying to do," he said.

Barickman said he and Mautino also agreed that testimony could spill over into a second day in early October, if necessary.

A Quinn spokeswoman acknowledged the governor's office did withhold some staff emails from a compact disc provided Friday to the commission, but she did not respond to questions about how many or from whom.

"Those not provided on the disc were privileged attorney-client communications between state employees and state attorneys either seeking or providing legal advice," Quinn spokeswoman Katie Hickey said.