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NRI decision mixed money & politics;

Gov. Quinn's camp has said anti-violence program had nothing to do with politics, but emails turned up by the Sun-Times tell a different story

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SPRINGFIELD - Newly released emails from Gov. Pat Quinn's office show politics appeared to trump credentials when deciding how big a serving some nonprofits should get from his now-tarnished $54.5 million Neighborhood Recovery Initiative anti-violence grant program.

Emails from Quinn's former top aides recount how Cook County Recorder of Deeds Karen Yarbrough, a Maywood Democrat who had been the suburb's state representative, approached Quinn's administration in January 2011 to oppose giving NRI funding to a longtime social service provider in Maywood.

In her pitch, Yarbrough told the onetime head of the now-defunct agency that oversaw NRI that the Proviso Leyden Council for Community Action should not be paid to help integrate former prisoners into the community because it was "not being effective in Maywood and not using resources well," the emails show.

Yarbrough's concerns, recounted in a Jan. 20, 2011, email by Barbara Shaw, executive director of the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority, rapidly climbed the chain of command in the governor's office, going first to former Quinn deputy chief of staff Toni Irving and then to the governor's ex-chief of staff, Jack Lavin, the records show.

In relaying Shaw's message to Lavin, Irving alleged that "underlying" Karen Yarbrough's request was that the social service agency might be backing a rival to her husband, Henderson Yarbrough Sr., who was midway into his second term as Maywood's village president.

After hearing Karen Yarbrough's push, Quinn's staff agreed that the Proviso Leyden Council for Community Action should "split the work" with another unspecified entity, even though Proviso Leyden was deemed "most qualified" by Shaw and another top Quinn official, the emails show.

"Maywood has been rife with conflict about service providing agencies for NRI. At the core it seems that while Barbara Shaw and Arthur Bishop reviewed the Proviso Leyden proposal and found them the most qualified, the village of Maywood would like to exclude them from the grant," former Quinn deputy chief of staff Irving wrote on Jan. 20, 2011, to Lavin, the governor's chief of staff at the time.

"Underlying this is that the [Proviso Leyden] person is running against the village person for mayor," Irving continued. "Our intervention is to have them split the work even though PL is deemed better."

The details spelling out the Maywood funding dispute were in a batch of more than 2,000 emails Quinn's office provided to the Legislative Audit Commission on July 11 as part of the panel's ongoing probe into NRI, which also is being investigated by a federal grand jury in Springfield.

The exchanges represent one of the most clear-cut acknowledgments from within Quinn's onetime inner circle that political considerations did, in fact, factor into some of the decision-making involving NRI.

As recently as last week, Quinn aides dismissed as "ludicrous" the claim by Republicans that the NRI program was purely political. Quinn announced the program a month before the 2010 election and abolished it in 2012 amid serious mismanagement.

Asked about the Maywood emails, a Quinn aide said Tuesday that no one on the email chain is still on the state payroll.

"It appears the former state employees were attempting to avoid a conflict between the two sides while ensuring that anti-violence programming continued and was not interrupted," Quinn spokeswoman Katie Hickey said. "The NRI program was shut down in 2012 and anti-violence grants were moved to a new agency overseen by law enforcement.

"In addition, the governor pushed for and signed into law legislation that will make Illinois a leader for grant oversight," she said.

Quinn's administration put Maywood in charge of divvying up $2 million in NRI money for that western suburb in 2011 and 2012. A month into the program, Proviso Leyden had been shut out of funding by the village, prompting a December 2010 complaint to the administration by the organization.

Proviso Leyden eventually wound up receiving $117,715 of the Maywood allotment for re-entry work under NRI.

Maywood allotted a larger, $255,724 chunk of NRI re-entry funds to another nonprofit, Vision of Restoration.

Vision of Restoration's founder, Marvin E. Wiley, donated $250 to Henderson Yarbrough's campaign fund, and board member Richard Boykin gave $5,000 to political funds of Karen and Henderson Yarbrough. Boykin is a former chief of staff to U.S. Rep. Danny Davis, D-Ill., and he ran unsuccessfully last spring for the Cook County board.

Karen Yarbrough said she was "shocked" to learn that Maywood's mayoral politics wound up surfacing in an internal discussion within Quinn's office about how to carve up the suburb's $2 million NRI allotment.

"I'm really surprised to hear this, that state government knows what is going on in Maywood as far as whether someone is going to run for office from [Proviso Leyden]. Wow," said Yarbrough, who also denied discussing her husband's political ambitions with Quinn aides.

Henderson Yarbrough went on to lose the Maywood village presidency in 2013 but not to the person Quinn's onetime inner circle portrayed as his potential rival: Proviso Leyden founder Bishop Claude Porter.

On Tuesday, the Chicago Sun-Times read the recorder of deeds the NRI email discussions outlining Maywood's mayoral landscape. Yarbrough said she was left with one conclusion.

"If that's what it says, that's what it is: politics," she said.