

Whispers of impeachment grow louder at Capitol

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SPRINGFIELD — Gov. Rod Blagojevich, following his usual practice, slipped into a gathering through a little-used service entrance here today and prayed with lawmakers and citizens during his annual prayer breakfast.

It marked one of his rare appearances here, even more infrequent now, as the capital has become increasingly consumed by developments in a public corruption trial in Chicago involving his former fundraiser and adviser, Antoin "Tony" Rezko.

Some observers wonder whether Blagojevich will become even more isolated as the trial and broader federal investigation of his administration continues. On Tuesday, a witness claimed the governor was on hand when he traded a \$25,000 campaign donation for a ranking state post.

There is a "growing public clamor" for an impeachment case against Blagojevich, said Rep. John Fritchey, a Chicago Democrat whose district includes Blagojevich's home. Fritchey said lawmakers must approach impeachment with "great reluctance" but that they may consider the remedy now that Blagojevich was "alleged to have committed very troubling acts."

For the governor's part, he seemed to allude to his situation Wednesday toward the end of his remarks to the prayer breakfast when he quoted an old Hank Williams song.

"You never stood in that man's shoes or saw things through his eyes, or watched with helpless hands while the heart inside you dies," the governor said. "So help your brother along the way, no matter where he starts, because the same God that made you made him too, these men with broken hearts."

Some observers say the escalating legal probe may do little to change matters at the Capitol.

"You've got a governor who is not trusted by the vast majority of legislators," said Mike Lawrence, director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University. "He has not been trusted for several years now. And the fact that he's having legal problems will just reaffirm their distrust."

Blagojevich and lawmakers have for months been at loggerheads over how to patch a deficit in the current budget, how to craft the next budget and how to structure a capital construction plan. The Rezko trial coupled with the related probe is just one factor driving gridlock.

Some observers called Tuesday's development significant. Ali Ata, the former executive director of the Illinois Finance Authority, admitted in a court document that he lied to the FBI in December 2005 when he told an agent he did not owe his \$127,000 job to his donations to Blagojevich or to the influence of Rezko.

Charles Wheeler, director of the public affairs reporting program at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said Ata's statement "seems to implicate (Blagojevich) more directly" than previous allegations concerning the governor.

"For Blagojevich, this ratchets up the concern of what the federal government is doing, and it's got to be a major distraction for him," he said.

Blagojevich has not been charged criminally with wrongdoing.

Spokeswoman Abby Ottenhoff said today that Blagojevich is focused on crafting a capital construction program — the "primary goal of the next fiscal year," she said.

"Those who suggest that resolutions can't be reached because of an unrelated court case are fishing for excuses," she said.

Chris Mooney, a UIS political studies professor, said the intensifying federal probe could increase pressure on Senate President Emil Jones Jr., D-Chicago, to break his alliance with Blagojevich.

Blagojevich and Jones have since last spring feuded with House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago.

"In that way it might help things, get things moving, to get (Blagojevich) out of the picture," Mooney said.

Jones spokeswoman Cindy Davidsmeyer dismissed that notion, saying the Jones/Blagojevich alliance is based not on politics but on mutual policy goals.

Staff writer Andrea Zimmermann, GateHouse News Service writer Meagan Sexton and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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