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Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich speaks at St. Louis Downtown Airport in Cahokia in November 2006.

Special election may cause funding headaches for clerks

By Chris Coates

Of all the region's political observers tracking Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich's ongoing political and legal saga, Madison County Clerk Mark A. Von Nida and Bob Delaney, the St. Clair County clerk, might be watching the closest.

"If I have to do two elections, it's going to be \$450,000," said Delaney about the prospect of holding a special election in light of the allegations.

The clerks are keeping tabs on Blagojevich, who faces federal corruption charges, because of the possibility that state lawmakers will strip him of the power to nominate someone to fill President-elect Barack Obama's vacant U.S. Senate seat, forcing a quickly organized special election across the state.

Legislators are meeting in Springfield to hammer out an agreement, including whether to open the polls and fill the Senate seat quickly. Another option is to impeach the governor, installing Lt. Gov. Patrick J. Quinn in the post.

Both are options, although no one is telling the state's 100-plus clerks charged with administering elections about the process - or how to fund it.

"We don't know what's going to happen," said Von Nida one day last week. "There are no plans."

The uncertainty means county clerks can't plan or budget for the election, said Stephen Caliendo, a state elections expert and associate political science professor at North Central College in Naperville, Ill.

"They can't even plan because they don't know what to do," he said, adding that if an election does happen, it will almost certainly attract a huge turnout, costing even more. "That's going to be increased by a high-profile race like this."

Von Nida said he's closely following the talks, although there's no word yet about what will happen if a vote is required. A major issue is funding - an election will cost at least \$250,000, with no state contributions.

Delaney pegged the special election expense closer to \$225,000 for St. Clair County, which might force him to dip in the general fund.

Some of those cost concerns have legislators considering tacking the senate election onto primary Election Day on Feb. 25, or the general election in April.

Caliendo, however, said there's worry about leaving a U.S. Senate seat open for months, eliminating half of the state's legislative power in Washington, D.C. "No one seems to want to wait very long," he said.

For now, lawmakers seem to be leaning towards impeachment, not the election option, Von Nida said.

"A special election isn't imminent," he said.

If Blagojevich steps down or is impeached, Quinn will assume the governor's role and nominate someone to fill the senate seat.

A petition filed by Attorney General Lisa Madigan to have the Illinois Supreme Court remove the governor from office failed earlier this month.

Among those supporting legislation to remove Blagojevich is his longtime friend, state Rep. Jay C. Hoffman (D-Collinsville).

Blagojevich and a former aide have been charged with trying to receive money for nominating certain people to fill the seat. The governor is also accused of using political clout to get the Tribune Co. to fire Chicago Tribune writers who penned critical editorials about him and pressing a hospital executive to contribute funds, according to court documents unsealed earlier this month.

The governor and his former aide face up to three decades in prison if found guilty.

The governor at a press conference in Chicago on Friday denied any wrongdoing and said he does not plan to resign.

"I will fight. I will fight. I will fight until I take my last breath," the governor said during his first substantial public comments about the Dec. 9 arrest. "I have done nothing wrong."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Local lawmakers on impeachment committee

Two area legislators are on the state panel crafting rules for potential impeachment proceedings against Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich.

State Sens. William R. Haine (D-Alton) and James Clayborne (D-Belleville) were named to the nine-member Senate Special Committee on Impeachment Trial Procedures.

The committee is writing procedures and policies for the possible hearings, which would occur after the Illinois House of Representatives approves impeachment legislation. The impeachment hearing would be heard by the state Senate, with Illinois Supreme Court Justice Robert R. Thomas overseeing the procedure.