

Wanted a 'good gig' for Senate seat

Judge releases document outlining evidence against Gov. Blagojevich

CHICAGO-- U.S. District Court Judge James Zagel unsealed documents allegedly shedding light on indicted former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich's efforts to personally profit from naming a successor to the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Barack Obama, illegally pressuring potential campaign donors for money, and other charges.

The 91-page evidentiary submission--called a "Santiago Proffer"--outlines the co-conspirator statements federal prosecutors hope to introduce against Blagojevich and his brother Robert at a June trial.

The proffer was released after three news organizations, the Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times and Associated Press, sought access to it.

Zagel dismissed defense attorney's concerns that releasing the proffer so close to the June 3 scheduled start of the trial could unfairly influence potential jurors. "Disclosure of written material a month and a half before the beginning of the trial does not come close to presenting a significant threat that a fair jury cannot be found," he said in a statement.

"The words in papers and magazines and the words read by an anchor on radio or television will not be retained in significant detail by members of the public," he wrote.

Convicted real estate mogul Antoin "Tony" Rezko was prominently mentioned in the document. Rezko was one of the governor's top fundraisers and allegedly mastermind of some of the plans to turn their political fortune into personal riches.

The proffer alleges that Blagojevich wasn't interested in good government when Obama's election gave him an opportunity to name a U.S. senator. In one conversation with his chief of staff John Harris, Blagojevich allegedly discussed going to work in Washington if he appointed Obama's preference for the Senate seat, Valerie Jarrett.

"The objective is to get a good gig over there," Blagojevich said.

Unable to trade the Senate appointment for an Obama cabinet post, he turned his attention to U.S. Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. who he said in a recorded conversation "wants it badly and desperately and he's the one who's willing to, like, offer stuff."

It was one of a series of Dec. 4 2008 calls in which Blagojevich described his disdain for Jackson, but his appreciation of the \$1.5 million Jackson supporters had promised in campaign cash in exchange for appointing him.

Federal prosecutors also offered new details about Rezko's alleged efforts to funnel more than \$150,000 to Patti Blagojevich for real estate work she didn't do. "Rezko did not seem to care if she actually did anything to earn the money," the proffer said.

Prosecutors also suggested that Patti Blagojevich used almost all of a \$40,000 commission from Rezko that she didn't earn to pay for renovations at the couple's Northwest Side home.

Lexus GX 460 sales halted worldwide



TOKYO-- Toyota suspended sales of its Lexus GX 460 sport utility vehicle worldwide Thursday after Consumer Reports said there were safety concerns. The U.S. magazine gave the SUV a rare "don't buy"

recommendation after tests showed there was a risk of rollover at high-speed.

The move followed Toyota's suspension of GX sales in the United States and Canada Wednesday.

"The company has decided to suspend the SUV's sales worldwide, which means also in Russia and Middle East after North America," said Toyota spokeswoman Mieko Iwasaki.

The move is another blow to the Japanese automaker who recalled eight Toyota models in January for sticky-accelerator concerns.

The magazine reported that the GX "slid out until the vehicle was almost sideways before the electronic-stability control system was able to regain control."

Toyota said it will work on identifying potential safety risks in the model. The company sold about 4,800 of the Lexus GX 460 in the first quarter.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration cautioned drivers of the Lexus to "avoid excessive speed and aggressive maneuvering in order to maintain control of their vehicles." The agency is in the process of making sure the SUV complies with its safety-standard for electronic-stability control.

"It is our belief that (electronic-stability control) should prevent the kind of fishtail event described," said Julia Piscitelli, NHTSA's director of communications.

The last time Consumer Reports found a vehicle unacceptable and gave it a "don't buy" designation was with the 2001 Mitsubishi Montero Limited.

Obama's nuclear summit a step forward

But world leaders avoid sticky issues



WASHINGTON-- Leaders of more than 40 nations left this week's global summit in Washington pledging to voluntarily prevent hundreds of thousands of tons of weapons-grade nuclear materials scattered around the world from falling into the hands of terrorists and scheduled a 2012 summit in South Korea to measure progress.

But the leaders did not fully commit themselves to legally binding plans to secure prescribed amounts of nuclear material or convert nuclear reactors that use highly enriched uranium to less-dangerous fuel. Instead, they said they would work together "as appropriate" and would make such conversions "where technically and economically feasible," according to the final documents.

During the two-day conference called by President Barack Obama, leaders vowed an unprecedented effort to crack down on nuclear smuggling, step up the sharing of nuclear information and help develop common standards and procedures.

"Terrorist networks such as al-Qaida have tried to acquire the material for a nuclear weapon, and if they ever succeed, they would surely use it, Obama said. "Were they to do so, it would be a catastrophe for the world.

"We have seized this opportunity, and because of steps we've taken, the American people will be safer and the world will be more secure."

The summit may have come up short in securing solid commitments for the disposal of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium, according to some critics. Russia and China still remain a question mark regarding cooperating with the U.S. in sanctions against Iran.

Nonetheless, the two-day summit appears to have served the purpose Obama wanted. It sets the stage for larger confrontations over nuclear proliferation. In May, the United Nations will convene the first review of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in five years. Obama wants to punish countries that back out of the NPT after advancing their nuclear-weapons programs in secret. He also wants to isolate Iran.

Governor calls for no mining on Friday

CHARLESTON, W. Va.-- Gov. Joe Manchin issued an executive order asking for a one day safety shutdown in West Virginia mines on Friday, following last week's explosion that killed 29 miners and injured two more.

He said the day will be used to evaluate procedures rather than to produce coal. "This is not a day off," he told reporters in a conference call from the capital city of Charleston. "We're asking for a day to honor every miner that has fallen, the 29 miners that we did lose."

A state mine safety spokeswoman says high gas readings are keeping investigators from entering the Massey Energy Co.'s sprawling Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal, Va. It may take two weeks to get a safe airflow inside.

Manchin vowed to find the cause of the April 5 blast, but said he wanted to ensure safety procedures are followed while the investigation is being carried out. "We are taking this day to review all of our practices of safety and we're basically making sure that all of our practices are adequate and safe."

Massey Energy said it approved of the move.

"We agree with the governor's request and believe it is an appropriate way to honor the miners we lost in the tragedy," the company said in a statement. "Massey will use this as an opportunity to reflect on events of April 5 and will focus our attention on safety and training."

The Upper Big Branch Mine is closed because of the explosion and will not be allowed to reopen until the investigation is complete" and we are assured that Massey Energy can effectively and successfully provide for the safety and health of those in the mine," Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis said Tuesday in a statement.

She and Mine Safety and Health Administrator Joseph Main are to meet Thursday with President Obama at the White House where they are expected to deliver a preliminary report on the disaster, along with any recommendations they have to improve mine safety.

Israel accuses Syria of supplying Scud missiles to Hezbollah

JERUSALEM--Israel President Shimon Peres accused Syria Wednesday of supplying Scud missiles to the Lebanese Hezbollah while publicly talking peace. Meanwhile, Lebanon has complained to the United Nations over Israel's violation.

Syria says it wants peace while at the same time it delivers Scuds to Hezbollah whose only goal is to threaten the state of Israel, Peres said on public radio. There have been reports in the past, notably in Arab media and by specialized think-tanks, that Syria was sending some of its arsenal of Scud missiles to Lebanon.

"Syria believes it do nothing more than let itself be courted by the world, while saying one thing and doing the opposite," Peres said. He made the comments just hours before flying to Paris

where he is expected to discuss the issue in talks with French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

In Washington, the Syrian Embassy dismissed the allegations and accused Israel of trying to divert attention from questions about its nuclear program. Israel is widely believed to possess nuclear arms, though it does not confirm or deny this.

The White House says it has raised concerns with Syria about reports that the Middle East nation is providing Hezbollah with Scud missiles that could hit any part of Israel. Press secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters that the U.S. has an unbreakable bond with the Israeli people and in ensuring their security.

Israel Defense Minister Ehud Barak issued a statement urging the public to remain calm, but said "the introduction of systems that disturb the balance endanger stability and calm."

Hezbollah fired nearly 4,000 unguided Katyusha rockets during the 2006 war, causing widespread damage and dozens of casualties in Israel's north. Scud missiles have several times the range and explosive firepower of Katyusha rockets and would pose a much more serious threat.

17 now dead in Italy train derailment

ROME, Italy-- A 14-car freight train carrying liquefied petroleum gas derailed and exploded in Viareggio, Italy Monday, killing 17 people.

Two small children were among the victims.

The incident took place where tracks cross a narrow gorge, police said. The diesel train was traveling on the Val Venosta line, one of the region's newest railways inaugurated in 2005.

The train was traveling south through coastal Tuscany when the axle on the first car broke, officials said. The train ran off the tracks and exploded.

The flames destroyed entire streets. Five buildings collapsed killing some residents as they slept. More than 1,000 people were evacuated and about 100 left homeless, Viareggio mayor Luca Lunardini said.

The train came to rest when it reached the trunk of two big trees, according to a local journalist. One of the carriages was left hanging over the Adige River.

Accusations of poor infrastructure and questions about why the dangerous materials were being shipped through residential areas were questions Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi confronted after he arrived in Viareggio Tuesday.

At a news conference, Berlusconi said the government would soon call a state of emergency and that it would also "guarantee the reconstruction of 100 percent of the houses destroyed."

Railway unions held a one-hour halt in train traffic Wednesday out of respect for the dead and to draw attention to the need for higher safety standards.



About 100 people are homeless as a result of the train accident in Viareggio, Italy