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Devastating floods give political boost to Blagojevich

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Gov. Rod Blagojevich grabs a cell phone from Todd Hazelwood, a City of Springfield public works employee, during sandbagging operations Wednesday at the Oakley-Lindsay Center in Quincy. Hazelwood was on the phone with his wife when the governor decided to chat with her as well, and discussed Hazelwood's son's baseball game he was scheduled to play later that evening. Blagojevich was in Quincy to support volunteers as they filled sandbags to battle the rising Mississippi River.

By **DEANNA BELLANDI**

The Associated Press

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QUINCY — When Gov. Rod Blagojevich stopped to visit volunteers filling sandbags to fight floodwaters threatening this Mississippi River town, the spotlight was not on impeachment. Or his ongoing feud with lawmakers. Or the conviction of his top political fundraiser.

Instead, the Democratic governor was greeted with smiles and handshakes — even by 25-year-old Quincy Republican Kent Voth, who took a break from shoveling sand to mug for a picture with Blagojevich.

"I'm glad he came," said Voth.

The floods that have devastated the Midwest couldn't have come at a politically better time for Gov. Rod Blagojevich. After months of staying mostly out of public view, the governor has spent the week touring flood-ravaged areas and lobbying for relief for homeowners, businesses and communities.

And residents have been glad to see him.

"We're thrilled to death that he's here," Quincy Mayor John Spring said of Blagojevich when the governor flew to Quincy earlier this week during a daylong tour of western Illinois communities struggling to hold back the swollen Mississippi River. Blagojevich also visited Spring's city June 13.

Visiting flood zones helps showcase Blagojevich as the state's leader — he helped load sandbags in Pike County — and lets residents know officials are paying attention to their plight, said Kent Redfield, a political science

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professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

"You can't look bad out showing concern for disaster victims," Redfield said.

Blagojevich was headed to the Metro East on Friday to check out the flooding as the swollen Mississippi charges through the state, leaving deluged farmland and drowned-out communities in its wake.

The attention is a switch for Blagojevich, who has had difficulty getting lawmakers and the media to focus on issues important to him, in large part because of the corruption trial of his former fundraiser Antoin "Tony" Rezko.

Rezko earlier this month was convicted on charges of fraud, money laundering and aiding and abetting bribery after a trial that exposed more crooked politics in Illinois that Blagojevich says he has no part in.

Still, the trial heated up talk of impeaching Blagojevich, who is unpopular with some lawmakers and whose administration has been the subject of a federal corruption investigation. The governor has not been charged with wrongdoing.

But he has been lying low, limiting public appearances and refusing to talk to reporters after recent meetings with top lawmakers to try to fix a state budget that he says is \$2 billion in the red.

Now, the governor is crisscrossing the state as the floodwaters surge.

"In times like this, whenever there is disaster, tragedy ... the fact that he was here, even though he has other trouble, I actually appreciate," said Republican state Rep. Roger Eddy of Hutsonville, who has chafed at Blagojevich before and was one of the lawmakers who raised the idea of impeaching the governor a year ago.

Blagojevich also had visited Lawrenceville, in Eddy's southeastern Illinois district, on June 13 to see areas affected by river flooding. Nonetheless, Eddy was still frustrated by what he said was a slow initial state response to earlier flash flooding in the area caused by heavy rain.

"I'm not saying the governor can be everywhere, but someone, I think, earlier in the scenario needed to be involved here," Eddy said.

Despite the distractions Blagojevich faces, the focus of his trip Wednesday was on the rising Mississippi and the surging floodwaters plaguing communities in the western part of his state, not on other issues, like whether he intends to veto the budget.

"That's something I got to deal with in the not-too-distant future, but right now this is an emergency. It's a real-life challenge that people are facing," he told the crowd at a press conference.

Blagojevich suggested he might be able to find extra relief for flood-affected communities in the capital plan he is pushing. But most of his time was spent talking to people — the sort of meeting and greeting at which he's particularly adept.

"Thanks for everything," he yelled out to Illinois National Guard soldiers walking on a section of levee in Pike County.

At a sandbagging site at the Pike County fairgrounds, Kathy Gates of Pleasant Hill said she was glad Blagojevich visited the area because it meant he got to see firsthand what people faced.

"I just can't believe this is happening," she said.

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