

## Hoffman's clout may take a blow

BY MIKE FITZGERALD

State Rep. Jay Hoffman, one of Gov. Rod Blagojevich's staunchest political allies and closest friends, had little to say Tuesday after the governor's arrest on federal corruption charges.

"Like all Illinoisans, I am saddened by today's news," Hoffman announced in a press release. "I have no knowledge concerning the allegations, and for any comment you should contact the governor's office directly."

Hoffman, D-Collinsville, could not be reached for further comment Tuesday.

Kent Redfield, an expert on political money at the University of Illinois at Springfield, predicted that Hoffman's influence in the statehouse -- he's chairman of the House Transportation Committee -- will wane sharply when the 2009 House session begins next month because of Blagojevich's legal woes.

"Clearly as the governor's (ally), that gave him a certain element of strength and attention and deference," Redfield said. "And now it's probably a liability."

With calls for Blagojevich's resignation or impeachment growing increasingly strident among both Republican and Democratic leaders, Hoffman's own political future boils down to politics, said Cindi Canary, executive director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform.

"He certainly has not made friends with the speaker of the House in this position," Canary said. "But Jay was just re-elected. He has got his seat."

Hoffman sided with Blagojevich even though it meant going against powerful House Speaker Michael Madigan, whose feuding with the governor led to serious talk of impeachment only a few months ago.

Hoffman's loyalty to the governor continued despite public opinion polls that showed the governor enjoyed the support of only 13 percent of Illinois voters -- a record low.

As a reward for that loyalty, last year Hoffman served as the governor's floor leader on a \$25 billion infrastructure improvement program that would have greatly benefited the metro-east.

Hoffman's links to Blagojevich stretch back to late 2002, soon after Blagojevich was elected governor. That's when Hoffman submitted a list of 15 applicants for state jobs to Blagojevich.

Penciled next to each applicant's name was another: Hoffman's. At the time, he was serving on Blagojevich's transition team.

Hoffman denied in a 2006 News-Democrat story that these 15 job applicants had received any special preference.

"If someone I believe is qualified and they want to use my name as a recommendation, they can," Hoffman said. "And I recommend people who are qualified all the time. And not only for government jobs."

Because of his close links to Blagojevich, Hoffman became a target of a heavily funded Republican attempt to unseat him in the Nov. 4 election.

The GOP and business groups poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into the coffers of Republican challenger Dwight Kay of Glen Carbon, turning the 112th District House race into one of the most expensive lawmaker contests statewide.

Kay criticized Hoffman for the veteran lawmaker's acceptance of money from road builders and other major contractors likely to benefit from Hoffman's chairmanship of the transportation panel.

"I don't care if you call it 'pay-to-play,' or 'pay-to-pave' politics," Kay declared shortly before the election, "it's just wrong."

Despite the corruption allegations leveled by his Republican opponent, Hoffman cruised to an easy re-election victory last month.

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