

House impeaches Blagojevich for a second time

By Andrew Thomason

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. —

Gov. Rod Blagojevich made more history Wednesday by being the first Illinois governor to be impeached twice and the first to have a trial started against him.

Shortly after being sworn in at the University of Illinois at Springfield and taking care of the usual first-day business, the House voted 117-1 to impeach the governor for the second time in less than a week.

The resolution voted on was identical to the one passed nearly unanimously Friday. Since a new General Assembly was sworn in Wednesday, House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, wanted to ensure the impeachment was legally airtight.

“Our lawyers have advised us that before the Senate begins to go to trial, we ought to move on this resolution today,” Madigan said.

Rep. Barbara Flynn Currie, chairman of the special House committee commissioned to determine if Blagojevich should be impeached, made it clear again why the House took such an extreme step.

“The totality of the evidence that came before the special investigative committee shows us a man who has betrayed his oath of office, who has betrayed the public trust, who is not fit to govern the state of Illinois. Mr. Blagojevich has forfeited his right to hold office, he should be impeached,” Currie, D-Chicago, said to applause from the audience.

As legislators individually stood to cast their vote by voice, only one, quick and quiet “no” was heard. Freshman Rep. Deborah Mell, D-Chicago, cast her first vote as a member of the House against impeaching her brother-in-law, Blagojevich.

Mell darted out a back door afterward. She did not explain her actions and only told reporters that she was “very excited to be here.” Mell defended her vote in a subsequent press release.

"I have known the governor for more than 20 years and the charges in the impeachment were difficult to reconcile with the man and brother-in-law I know. I could not in good conscience vote for his impeachment. I regard him as innocent until proven guilty and many of my constituents have expressed this view," she stated.

Mell wasn't the only one in an awkward position Wednesday. Blagojevich presided over swearing in the new senators who will be responsible for his trial.

The Senate did its best to avoid the impeachment topic while the target of its upcoming trial was still present.

Senators waited until Blagojevich handed over the reins to new Senate President John Cullerton, D-Chicago, before moving forward with trial. The chamber was solemn and quiet, a stark contrast to the cheerful vibe of the swearing-in just moments earlier.

"We embark today on an extraordinarily serious endeavor," said Sen. Dale Righter, R-Mattoon.

The Senate started the trial process by welcoming House prosecutor David Ellis, who read the "totality of evidence" charges that make up the article of impeachment supported by the House against Blagojevich.

Senators approved their rules governing the trial and the schedule, which calls for the trial to begin in earnest Jan. 26. Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice Thomas Fitzgerald presides over the trial and oversaw some of the initial proceedings Wednesday.

The Senate's sergeant-at-arms went downstairs from the Senate chamber on the third floor of the Capitol to the governor's office on the second floor to deliver the summons for Blagojevich to answer to the article of impeachment. He has until Saturday to answer to the article, and until Tuesday to file a motion to try to get the article dismissed.

Senators will be in regular session Thursday, but will not handle impeachment business again until Jan. 26 to give both sides time to file motions and do other pre-trial preparation.

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