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Posted on Sat, Sep. 16, 2006

## Blagojevich making habit of suddenly giving away money

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**SPRINGFIELD, III.** - Gov. Rod Blagojevich was feeling "a lot of love in my heart" as he looked out over the crowd at a State Fair livestock auction, and he wanted some way to show his affection.

So he gave away \$500,000 in taxpayers' money.

"I'm going to call an audible. I'm the governor. I make the big decisions in government," he said before announcing that the agriculture youth groups FFA and 4-H would each be getting \$250,000.

The Democratic governor has been making a lot of similar announcements lately.

He decided to spend \$5 million on stem cell research. He gave an extra \$1 million to a campaign contributor's efforts to build a minor league ballpark. He promised to put Carterville High School and its \$1.9 million worth of repairs at the top of the state's priority list. He expanded a Chicago jobs program.

Lawmakers of both parties look at these "spontaneous" announcements and see a skillful politician who has found a way to get maximum publicity out of an old practice.

"It is an election year," said Sen. Donne Trotter, a Chicago Democrat who specializes in budget issues. "This is a way of saying I'm a working governor and I'm working on the needs of your community."

All governors have used their authority to tinker with the budget, Trotter and others said. New needs come up, groups explain their problems and the state finds extra money to help them out.

But that has usually been treated as a matter of routine and done with little fanfare. Blagojevich changed that.

"He has a more TV style about it. He is very much a master of the media," said Rep. Gary Hannig of Litchfield, the House Democrats' top budget expert.

Some lawmakers are more critical.

Rep. Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville, said putting Carterville at the head of the repair list means it will get help before schools that have followed the law by going through a review process and waiting for state help. He called Blagojevich's attitude "arrogant and dangerous. If he can ignore the law in this case and gets by with it, what's next?"

Blagojevich's response to critics? "If they have a problem with me putting Carterville at the top of the list, sue me," he said Thursday.

Blagojevich likes to suggest these announcements are entirely spontaneous, a response to the event and the people involved.

"It came from me just sitting here and feeling kind of emotional about this special day," Blagojevich said when he announced \$4 million in financial aid, instead of the \$3 million that was originally budgeted, for a baseball park in Marion.

He has even told crowds that Budget Director John Filan will be angry when he hears about these decisions.

But Blagojevich's budget office says he always checks before announcing any grants to ensure the money is available. "Director Filan often briefs the governor on the amount of funding available for different projects, so he always knows

what's doable and what isn't," said spokeswoman Becky Carroll.

The money comes from a variety of different state accounts.

Money for the ballpark and the Carterville school repairs comes from construction funds, Carroll said. Democrats and Republicans have been unable to agree on a broad new construction program, but the state does have money to handle emergencies or local economic-development projects.

"If the governor finds that such a situation exists, and the state's assistance can make an immediate and meaningful difference, he'll take action," Carroll said.

The money for stem-cell research, in contrast, meant taking funds away from other purposes.

Before the state budget was approved, the administration told lawmakers it contained nothing for stem cell research. Afterward, Blagojevich decided to fund the research and came up with the money by taking it out of administrative expenses in the Department of Healthcare.

Carroll said she was not sure where the money for the FFA and 4-H would come from.

It's also not clear how it will be used.

The FFA normally gets about \$38,000 a year from the state for helping educate students about careers in agriculture. Suddenly getting nearly seven times more comes as something of a surprise.

James Craft, the group's executive secretary, said he can think of several ways to use the money, such as creating an emergency fund and modernizing and duplicating the FFA's archives.

"It's going to be a huge pickup," Craft said.

The boost to 4-H won't be quite as dramatic.

The University of Illinois Extension service already gets more than \$1.6 million a year for youth development programs, said Glenn Seeber, assistant to the Extension's associate dean. The organization doesn't yet know how Blagojevich wants to use the additional money, he said.

Lawmakers say there's no doubt that Blagojevich has the authority to hand out this money, whether he gets it from special funds or by shuffling money around within agency budgets. But they also question how much of it has to do with Blagojevich seeing a true need and coming up with a sound response.

"He's doing it," said Rep. Mark Beaubien, R-Barrington Hills, "purely for political purposes."