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House impeaches Blagojevich

By Kurt Erickson and Jason Nevel, The Southern Springfield Bureau

Friday, January 9, 2009 11:37 PM CST

SPRINGFIELD - One month to the day after Gov. Rod Blagojevich was arrested on federal corruption charges, the Illinois House voted overwhelmingly Friday to impeach the Chicago Democrat.

The 52-year-old chief executive vowed to fight his ouster when the matter is taken up by the Senate later this month, saying he was being vilified for using creative ways to help people who need cheap prescription drugs and inexpensive health insurance.

"Is that an impeachable offense?" said Blagojevich at a Chicago appearance Friday afternoon.

The Senate is expected to launch its proceedings Jan. 26.

It will be the first time since 1833 the Senate has held an impeachment trial. In that case, Justice Theophilus W. Smith of the Illinois Supreme Court was impeached by the House, but the Senate did not convict.

"We've done our job in the House. The Senate now has the duty looking at that evidence and conducting a trial," said state Rep. John Bradley, D-Marion.

Blagojevich took office in 2003 and was re-elected in 2006. Although he fought with lawmakers throughout his tenure, it was his Dec. 9 arrest on federal corruption charges that triggered the House's action.

Blagojevich is charged with plotting to sell Illinois' vacant U.S. Senate seat, as well as attempting to shake down individuals for campaign contributions.

A special House impeachment committee said Blagojevich's governing style also was cause for removal. The panel, which met during the course of three weeks, reviewed evidence that Blagojevich tried to expand government without legislative approval. He also was criticized for alleged hiring improprieties.

"It took handcuffs on the governor to convince people that something needed to be done," said state Rep. Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville. "The governor is a unique combination of stupidity, arrogance and evil."

Blagojevich has denied any wrongdoing, but continued to vex his critics when, in the midst of his problems in December, he appointed former Illinois Attorney General Roland Burris to President-elect Barack Obama's vacant Senate seat.

He said Friday he was not surprised by the House's action because members have previously blocked his attempts to help the citizens of Illinois. The governor did not answer questions at a short news conference in Chicago.

The vote in the House came after a number of speeches by lawmakers, who said the governor betrayed the trust of the people of Illinois. The entire session lasted less than 90 minutes.

"The governor has failed to uphold his oath of office," said House Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie, a Chicago Democrat who oversaw the special committee that investigated the governor's actions.

"He's failed in his responsibility as governor," added House Minority Leader Tom Cross, R-Oswego. "You ought to be mad as hell. I am mad."



Gov. Rod Blagojevich makes a statement at a news conference Friday in Chicago. (AP)

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State Rep. Milt Patterson, D-Chicago, was the lone "no" vote. He said the evidence against Blagojevich wasn't strong enough.

"I do not feel comfortable voting based on what I've heard or read, simple as that. I went by my own gut feeling," Patterson said.

State Rep. Elga Jefferies, D-Chicago, was the lone "present" vote. She said the charges against the governor have been "blown out of proportion."

Other lawmakers, including those who sat on the investigative committee, disagreed.

"The evidence was overwhelmingly damning," said state Rep. Chapin Rose, R-Mahomet.

"It's our duty to clean up the mess and stop the freak show that's become Illinois government," said Rep. Jack Franks, D-Woodstock.

Rep. Susana Mendoza, D-Chicago, noted the allegation that Blagojevich threatened to withhold state funds for children's health care unless he got a campaign donation from a hospital executive.

"Repugnant is too kind a word to describe that action," she said.

Following the vote, there was hope the possible removal of Blagojevich could put an end to the gridlock that has plagued Illinois government for the past two years.

"He can't govern anymore. We need to get rid of him and move on," said state Rep. Shane Cultra, R-Onarga.

If Blagojevich is removed from office by the Senate, Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn will take over as governor.

Quinn, 61, is in his second term as lieutenant governor. He also served as Illinois treasurer.

- The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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Outspoken wrote on Jan 10, 2009 9:35 AM:

" I am glad he is on his way out, but if all those "charges" are true where in the world were all those politicians in that snake pit called the House of Representatives when this stuff started? Many questionable things that go on in this state may be legal but they are far from the best interest of the people. Go back and read the stories like "The No Bid Interstate(57)", a lack of a good civil service merit system, too many jobs filled by political appointments, failure to fund schools, the worst state tax system in the midwest, the irresponsibile gerrymandering of districts, etc. Too bad the whole House couldn't be impeached, I favor getting rid of the lot of these self-righteous pontificators. I hope the feds are monitoring them too. They tolerated guys like Ryan and Blago until there is a public out cry rather than having the guts to act at the first hint of offense. The public is to blame too as we keep returning the same incompetent people to office. "

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