

Blagojevich's grant vetoes worry non-profits

By Gregory Meyer
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(Crain's) — Windfall grants to Illinois non-profits disappeared for now with Gov. Rod Blagojevich's budget veto Thursday, leaving leaders of organizations anxious about funding their programs.

The veto nixed dozens of earmarks that state legislators wrote into the budget, including many to non-profit organizations. That would force some to curtail their services, leaders said.

“If it was lost to us, that would be a big blow to our organization,” said Gary Garland, executive director of the Lakeview Pantry, one of the busiest food pantries in the city. Gov. Blagojevich vetoed a \$25,000 state grant for the pantry that had been inserted into the budget bill by Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago.

A \$70,000 grant to the Ridge Historical Society in Beverly also was vetoed. The governor “has insulted every volunteer in this state,” said Herman Schell, a volunteer board member for the neighborhood group.

He said the grant, authorized by Rep. Kevin Joyce, D-Chicago, would have installed air conditioning in the society's 86-year-old home.

The veto of a \$208,000 grant for an autism treatment program at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center will “cut by 50% what we're able to do for kids who aren't able to pay” for follow-up services in their homes, limiting services to 10 families from 20, said Carol Rolland, the director of developmental pediatric services at the hospital. Rep. Feigenholtz also sponsored that grant.

In a press release, the governor's office highlighted several earmarks it found “had little to do with the core mission of state government.” The list of grants the governor appeared to find questionable included \$25,000 to the Union Pacific Railroad for “beautification” and \$40,000 to the Chicago International Salsa Congress, which stages a dance exhibition.



Carol Rolland of Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center

“A budget should reflect the priorities of the people who elected us to make their lives better. That’s why I’m removing almost \$500 million in special pet projects and other spending that we simply can’t afford,” the governor said in a statement.

For non-profit groups that initially won earmarks, the cuts were hard news to swallow.

“There’s a lot of anxiety out there,” said non-profit fundraising consultant Greg Simoncini, a vice-president at Scofield Co. “This is a time when there’s a lot of pressure on private fundraising.”

The cuts go back to the General Assembly for lawmakers to consider, but Senate President Emil Jones has promised to block any effort to overturn the vetoes.

(The Associated Press contributed to this story.)