

Who'll Decide How Much You Pay?

A look at the cast of characters running for the obscure but critical office of Cook County assessor

By Ben Joravsky



*Property tax consultant
Andrea Raila, who
promises reform*

“I’M RUNNING FOR COOK COUNTY ASSESSOR,” ANDREA RAILA TELLS PASSERSBY—MOST OF them rushing for the train—at the Davis Street el stop in Evanston on a sunny Tuesday morning. “This is a chance for some reform.”

“You mean it’s already another election?” says one woman who stops to sign her petition. Yes, it’s petition-passing time, the opening round of the 2010 Democratic primary season. The actual election’s not until February 2, but the gears have been in motion for the last several weeks as candidates hustle up the signatures they need to make the ballot.

Raila is running for one of those middle-of-the-ballot positions that, despite its importance, most voters know next to nothing about. The assessor plays a big role in determining who pays how much in property taxes (which affects you too, renters, ‘cause your landlord passes these taxes on to you in the form of higher rents). Your tax bill is determined by multiplying the tax rate against your home’s value. It’s the assessor and his (or her) computer geeks who determine that value. The higher their assessment of your property, the more you’re going to pay.

This is a race that in an ideal world would be determined by a healthy debate on our head-spinning property tax system. But in the early going it’s been dominated by raw, unadulterated Chicago politics. The current assessor, James Houlihan, who’s held the seat since 1997, is stepping down at the end of this term. Of the six announced candidates, the favorite has to be Joe Berrios, one of three commissioners on the county Board of Review (which hears property tax appeals) and chairman of the Cook County Democratic Party. As one of the party’s slated candidates, he’ll be backed by the area’s most powerful committeemen on a ticket with some of the best-known names in local politics, including sheriff Tom Dart, county clerk David Orr, and county treasurer Maria Pappas.

Berrios is not without vulnerabilities. He works as a lobbyist in Springfield for Comcast, the RTA, and video gambling firms, among others, raising questions about potential conflicts of interest since some of the lawmakers he lobbies—including House speaker Michael Madigan—are also attorneys who come before the Board of Review seeking reduced assessments for their clients. And as party chairman he helped engineer Todd Stroger’s elevation to the county board presidency, which may qualify as an unpardonable sin to the Tribune editorial board and thousands of north-siders and suburbanites.

But probably the most important thing to know about Berrios is that he’s a shrewd political player who knows all the ins and outs of election law. His key adviser is attorney Tom Jaconetty, who’s known for his ability to use the arcane rules and regulations of the election code to knock opponents off the ballot.

Besides Raila, Berrios has four other opponents: Ali ElSaffar, the assessor of Oak Park Township; Eugene Staples, a River Forest real estate broker and former cop; and a couple former Chicago aldermen, Robert Shaw and Raymond Figueroa. Berrios is already making it clear he’ll be looking over their nomination papers. “If you look at my career, you know I have a lawyer who looks at petitions,” he tells me with a little chuckle. “You should know that.”

Figueroa's candidacy, Berrios says, is nothing but the latest round in a complicated political squabble involving former eighth district Cook County commissioner Roberto Maldonado, who was appointed 26th Ward alderman by Mayor Daley in July. The Democratic committeemen whose wards make up Maldonado's old district were responsible for selecting his county board replacement, and Maldonado asked them to pick Xavier Nogueras, president of the Puerto Rican Chamber of Commerce of Illinois. But 33rd Ward alderman Richard Mell favored a former state trooper named Edwin Reyes. Mell outmaneuvered Maldonado—it wasn't the first time and probably won't be the last—and got Berrios and other committeemen to choose Reyes.

Berrios and other local politicians believe Maldonado got his longtime ally Figueroa to challenge Berrios for assessor, perhaps hoping it would pressure Berrios to support Nogueras over Reyes (who'll have to run to keep his seat) in the primary. "This is a payback thing," says Berrios. "We all know that." But Figueroa insists he's nobody's pawn. He says he's running to reform the property tax system. "This is not payback," he says. "I'm 62 years old. I got a lot of good years left."

In any event, Berrios says, he doubts Figueroa will be able to gather the 8,147 valid signatures needed to get on the ballot. And he may be right—Figueroa will have to collect thousands of extra signatures to make sure he has enough to survive a challenge from Jaconetty.

The most out-of-left-field candidate in the race has to be Shaw, who appeared to have retired from politics years ago. He and his twin brother, William, were always two of the more colorful characters on the local scene. They got their start in the 1960s as Democratic precinct captains in the west side's 24th Ward. In the 1970s they moved to the far south side, establishing a base of operations in Roseland. Bill Shaw served as a state senator and the mayor of Dolton; Bob Shaw got elected alderman of the Ninth Ward and later to the tax review board, where he served alongside Berrios until Larry Rogers ousted him in 2002.

Bill Shaw lost his state senate seat to James Meeks the same year, and when Bill died last December, it looked like the Shaw political dynasty had reached the end. But Bob Shaw is back and predicting he'll survive any ballot challenge Berrios brings. "I know all about Joe and his guy, Jaconetty," Shaw says. "You don't have to worry about me getting those petitions. I have them already. I've never been knocked off the ballot. I've knocked a few people off the ballot, though. I know how this game is played."

Having followed the Shaw brothers and their shenanigans for almost 30 years, I suspect Shaw's running in order to extract something from Berrios and other party bosses in exchange for dropping out of the race. But Shaw swears up and down that's he's in it to win it.

Berrios has another theory: he thinks Shaw's running because he has nothing better to do with his time. "Bob's an old friend—I went to his brother's wake," Berrios says. "I asked him, 'Bob, why are you running?' He told me, 'Joe, it's tough being out of the action.'"

"I'm not bored," Shaw retorted when I told him this. "If I was bored, I'd go skydiving. That's just something Joe's been saying. You tell Joe he's bored."

Raila, meanwhile, is the campaign's self-proclaimed reformer. A protege of Governor Pat Quinn—she worked as one of his aides when he was on the tax review board in the 1980s—she's also an artist who's used her skills in support of labor and political campaigns, and she's been an activist on property tax issues for years. Last year she helped lead the unsuccessful attempt to hold a new state constitutional convention. Raila now lives on the north side, where she runs a tax-appeal consulting business. She says she's determined to use the assessor's office as a bully pulpit for passing laws that would limit reassessment hikes and guarantee that at least 51 percent of all public education costs are paid for with state income taxes. Such reforms would drive down local property taxes.

Raila probably knows as much about property taxes as any candidate in the race, if not more—the woman's a true tax geek—and she's got a lot of cage-rattling spirit. On the other hand, voters don't know who she is, she doesn't have a lot of money, and no elected officials have come out to endorse her.

So her first order of business is to get enough signatures to get past that formidable Berrios/Jaconetty challenge.

"I know Berrios will challenge my petitions," she says. To get on the ballot, she'll need about 8,200 signatures; to survive the challenges, she's planning to get 16,000.

"I can give them hell on the issues and they know it," she says. "But the first step is to get past round one."

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