

Where the Action Is

By **DICK SIMPSON**

Cook County is a backwater of government — historically a sleepy place whose machinations didn't inspire the level of scrutiny state government or Chicago's city council routinely got. County does run the court system, the jail, Cook County hospitals and the Forest Preserves. It is also a center of patronage, waste and corruption, where familial ties can mean lucrative jobs and contracts.

Todd Stroger's reign as president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners, and his unrelenting support for a sales tax increase, however, has raised county government's profile in the press and among many voters. And this election season, many of the most important races are for county positions.

There is a competitive battle shaping up for president of the Cook County board. With Congressman Danny Davis dropping out, Ald. Toni Preckwinkle (4th) now has a real chance to defeat unpopular incumbent Stroger, Clerk of the Court Dorothy Brown and Water Reclamation District president Terry O'Brien in the Democratic primary.

Had he stayed in the race, Congressman Davis would have split the African-American and the progressive vote and made it more difficult for Preckwinkle to win.

In the race for Cook County Assessor, property tax consultant Andrea Raila and Oak Park Assessor Ali ElSaffar folded their campaigns, unfortunately. While Raila had more than the 8,000 signature minimum — plus a hundred people passing petitions — they were too little too late. She was seen bringing a proverbial breath of fresh air to the complex assessment process by many progressives, who were sad to see her go.

We are left with a contest between Cook County Democratic Party Chairman Joe Berrios and former judge and alderman Ray Figueroa. Figueroa, elected in 1987 as a Harold Washington supporter, will get the support of anti-machine voters across the county. But that may not be sufficient.

Another to watch is the race for county commissioner in the 7th District. Jesus "Chuy" Garcia is running against incumbent Joseph Marino.

Chuy was first elected as alderman during Mayor Harold Washington's "Council Wars" period. He later served two terms as Illinois' first Mexican-American state senator before the machine and the Hispanic Democratic Organization backed a candidate to oust him. Garcia is currently senior advisor to the Neighborhood Stabilization Program in the Illinois Department of Human Services.

Marino voted for the sales tax increase and then backed Stroger's veto when the county board previously voted to overturn the measure. Marino goes along with county patronage and waste but I think Garcia's independent political pedigree will make him a forceful voice for reform on the board.

Garcia is running with Latino activist Rudy Lozano Jr., who is seeking to unseat State Rep. Dan Burke, brother of Ald. Eddie Burke (14th).

Lazano is the son of a community activist slain in the 1983, two months after losing a 22nd

Ward aldermanic runoff election by 17 votes. His challenge is the first time in 19 years that Burke has had an opponent in a district that is more than two-thirds Hispanic.

Both candidates are off to strong starts. Lozano filed 4,000 petition signatures and Garcia filed 1,300 in a race that requires only 152. Garcia's were collected in only six days with volunteers going door to door.

These two races are about the future of Latino politics in Chicago — whether this growing demographic can establish itself as an independent force.

Lozano has declared his campaign to unseat Burke was about “taking back our neighborhood from the bankrupt political leadership running on the fumes of a greedy system that enriches their friends and ignores the rest of us.” His bid will determine the future of the Burke dynasty, which has ruled the Southwest Side since father Joe Burke became alderman in the mid-20th century.

Garcia says he is “running to usher in a new era of reform ... which translates into cleaning up county government and making county government work for working people.”

A Garcia victory would have an immediate impact on the Cook County Board. Expect Garcia to be vigorous in his opposition to Todd Stroger or in support of Toni Preckwinkle if she wins.

Frank Avila, a prominent Latino lawyer and activist, believes the Feb. 2010 Democratic Party primary looms as “the year of Hispanic independents and independence.”

This is an election that could help remake Cook County into a more honest government. One that is more efficient and effective. But it is also an election that could rearrange the local political landscape permanently.

Simpson, a former alderman, teaches political science at UIC. This column was first published in Chicago Journal.

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