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POLITICS

Could Race for Tax Assessor Get...Exciting?

Hidden among the many offices on next year's election ballot in Illinois: Cook County Assessor. Incumbent Jim Houlihan plans to retire, setting off what could be a big-ticket fight for a job few people understand. The assessor sets property values that wind up figuring into how much you pay in taxes. That sounds straight-forward enough, but the election that's shaping up for this office is far from simple.

To help explain what the Cook County Assessor's office does, I'm going to introduce you to a retired school teacher and township official from west suburban Riverside.

PAVLICH: Hi, my name is Pat Pavlich. I have an older building, probably built in 1950, maybe a little, around that time.

A couple years ago, when Pavlich got her property tax bill, something didn't seem right.

PAVLICH: And I took a look at what my neighbors were paying, and what I was paying and I said, there's a discrepancy here that I need to look into.

She appealed to the county assessor, who knocked about 8-percent off her assessment.

PAVLICH: I was pleased.

As anyone would be, but through all the research she did, Pavlich still can't figure out how the assessor's office come up with its numbers.

PAVLICH: And I've tried the math, but it just doesn't come out the same way, so.

That sort of shows how so many people in Cook County view the assessment and tax system: arbitrary, mindboggling. Confusion that remains despite the efforts of Assessor Jim Houlihan, who won the job 12 years ago with the backing of his friend and Democratic Party bigwig, then-Assessor Tom Hynes. With the blossoming of the internet, Houlihan's been praised for opening up the office, and bringing more transparency to assessments.

HOULIHAN: You know, my mother told me when I first went in to public office that the more people know about what you do, the more likely you'll do the right thing.

FREDDRENNALYLE: We need your support for the Cook County Democratic party fundraiser.

A block away from Houlihan's office is the Hotel Allegro, the unofficial meeting place of the Cook County Democratic Party. Last month committeemen got together to make their endorsements in the 2010 election, including for assessor.

BERRIOS: Well, for those of your who don't know who I am, I am Joe Berrios.

Everyone in that room of Democratic officials knows who Joe Berrios is. A 21-year veteran of the tax Board of Review, a committeeman himself, and chair of the county Democratic party.

BERRIOS: I am very proud of that record. A kid that grew up in Cabrini Green who never ever thought that he would have a chance that he would be here in front of you asking for your endorsement.

Berrios won the endorsement - handily - despite some stinging newspaper editorials that brought up a lot of baggage: His job as a lobbyist for the video poker industry, donations from real estate lawyers, and a reported investigation into some property appeals with allegedly-shady outcomes.

BERRIOS: People can look, and say what they want. But I can tell you, my record speaks for itself.

As the party's candidate, Berrios will have no trouble getting on the ballot for the February primary. But it's more difficult for the other Democrats in the race, who'll need to collect about 8,100 signatures.

RAILA: Could you help me out today with a signature?

WOMAN: Okay.

Andrea Raila is a first-time candidate collecting signatures on a train platform on Chicago's northwest side.

RAILA: I'm running for the Cook County Assessor's office. Those are the folks that put the value on your homes. They put the value on my home way too high, so I've decided to run.

That's an oversimplification of why she's running, and Raila admits it. She's running because she's a tax consultant herself and a longtime tax reform advocate, and she can't stomach the thought of a political insider like Joe Berrios running the assessor's office.

RAILA: I do not believe that a party chairman should be allowed to have an office like the Cook County Assessor. Taxpayers have lost their confidence in the system. They believe that it's political favoritism that gets you a tax reduction.

Raila seems confident she can launch an insurgent candidacy, as do two other outsiders: Oak Park Assessor Ali ElSaffar and real estate broker Gene Staples. Also expressing interest: former alderman and judge Ray Figueroa, and Bob Shaw, a former alderman and tax Board of Review commissioner.

12 years ago, Jim Houlihan rode his connections into this somewhat obscure job that affects so many pocketbooks. And, once again, the race for assessor is shaping up to be as much about political alliances as it is about property assessments.