



Thursday Oct 22 2009 | Chicago, IL Edition

Raila runs for assessor 1:30PM

Seeks to transform tax office

By PATRICK BUTLER

Edgewater resident Andrea Raila, a 25-year veteran property tax consultant and reform activist is going after her old boss's job.

The 48-year-old former case analyst for the Cook County Board of Review said she kicked off her campaign last week after Cook County Democratic Party Chairman Joseph Berrios - who has also served 27 years with the Board of Review, 19 of them as a commissioner - entered the race after longtime incumbent James Houlihan said he would not be seeking another term.

She said she's not only running to de-politicize a job she believes should be non-partisan, but wants to get the assessor's position made an appointive rather than elective office.

One possibility would be to have the assessor elected by the 30 suburban township committeemen, the County Board, and the Illinois governor, she said.

The assessor's job requires more technical expertise than most other public offices, said the head of Andrea Raila & Associates tax appeals consultants and the mother of three children, Christopher, 13; Reah, 10; and Rianna, 7. Her husband, Michael Rohrbeck of Loyola University's Center for Urban Learning and Research, also serves as her company's administrative manager.

While waiting for the office to become appointive, however, Raila said she'd put limits on campaign contributions she'd accept from tax appeal lawyers and consultants.

And with the state's seven percent cap on reassessment increases set to expire this year, Raila wants to go one step further by limiting triennial hikes for all residential and commercial properties to no more than five percent, with the exception of any new property sales and construction.

Raila wants to eventually go to an 'acquisition based assessment' system in which property taxes would be based on what the owner originally paid for the property, plus a modest two or three percent increase with each triennial assessment.

She'd also like to see the Cook County Assessor's office adopt the same practices used in most other Illinois counties which all properties are reviewed at once instead of dividing the county into three districts, each of which are reassessed in different years. The other 101 Illinois counties also reassess at the same rate for all property types instead of different levels ranging from empty lots to commercial properties.

Noting that the Cook County assessor oversees the valuation and taxation of more than 1.8 million pieces of real estate using one of the most complicated systems in the country, Raila said property valuations have been so far off state constitutional requirements the state has had to apply a multiplier of over 2.9 percent that makes the process even more complicated and inaccurate.

Raila added that as assessor, she would allow for tax appeal challenges to the state multiplier, which is not currently allowed.

And she promised to continue streamlining the office's operations and disclose any recent sales of particular properties.

“Jim Houlihan made positive steps at modernization and transparency. I want to continue to advance those improvements so taxpayers better understand how market values are derived and how their tax appeal decisions are made,” she said.

These and other reforms are more urgent than ever during the worst economic downturn in decades, she said.

“Homeowners, tenants, business people and investors are struggling. We must work now to make our tax system fair. These changes would curb the state's significant assessment and valuation powers over Cook County property owners,” she said.

In the meantime, Raila and her supporters have been at places like the Lincoln Square Farmers Market collecting the more than 8,000 signatures they'll need before the Nov. 2 filing deadline.

The self-described onetime ‘insider’ said she's counting on her professional experience as well as her current ‘outsider’ status to give her just the edge she needs in the February Democratic primary.