

All but impossible to override Stroger veto

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Call the Neanderthal who left anonymous, threatening, epithet-laced messages on Cook County Commissioner Deborah Sims voice mail by three names: Coward, racist and dope.

The first two require no explanation. The last one is worth a few words.

The caller, in addition to a mournfully stunted vocabulary, didn't seem to understand the focus of his tirade was misdirected.

True, Sims flip-flopped on a crucial vote, one poised to hand President Todd Stroger a stinging defeat. Had commissioners overridden Stroger, beleaguered county taxpayers might have seen a teeny-weeny half-cent bit of sales tax relief.

But Sims is a bit player, not the villain of this story.

House Speaker Mike Madigan and Stroger are the problem.

Each is a believer in the time-honored Chicago tradition of one-man rule. Thus, in Cook County, it's all but impossible to override a presidential veto because the threshold is so much higher than in other units of government across the country. Others require a three-fifths majority to override, but not us. We're stuck with a four-fifths requirement.

And so it takes a whopping 14 out of 17 votes to win a fight with the president.

And the Democratic Machine seems to like it that way. That includes Speaker Madigan.

Back in 2006, state Rep. John Fritchey (D-Chicago), bucked Madigan by proposing a bill that would put Cook County in line with the rest of the free world by lowering the override barrier. His bill died in a House committee.

This spring it looked like that legislation, this time sponsored by state Sen. Dan Kotowski (D-Park Ridge), might actually have a strong heartbeat.

The state Senate, led by President John Cullerton, passed it 57-0.

But once again, the life drained out of it when it went to Madigan's House. It lies like a corpse in the Rules Committee, where all good bills go to die unless the speaker raises them from the dead.

"Bills that the speaker wants to see passed, pass," Fritchey said by phone Friday. "Those that he doesn't want to see the light of day, don't."

Fritchey, who was only one of a handful of Democrats to denounce the hollow campaign finance reform bill his leadership claimed as "landmark," is now leaving the House to run for the Cook County Board. The seat he seeks has been occupied by now-retiring reform Commissioner Forrest Claypool.

And Fritchey has a few things to remind Stroger about as his campaign goes forward. Back in 2006, when Fritchey stuck his neck out on that override legislation, guess what? Stroger, who was running for president, sided with Fritchey *in favor* of it.

"Put power back into the hands of county commissioners," trumpeted a Stroger campaign press release.

But once elected? Whammo. Change of heart.

"The Office of the President of Cook County" is listed as an official opponent of Fritchey's bill. Just think.

If Fritchey's bill had passed two years ago or Kotowski's bill had been taken up in the House this year, maybe Commissioner Sims wouldn't have had to endure some sexist/racist ranting into her voice mail.

"We had a great opportunity to fix a problem before it really hurt the public," Fritchey said. "And it was an opportunity lost."

State Rep. Julie Hamos (D-Evanston) said Friday she will fight to get a House vote on it in the October veto session.

With another election, who knows?

Maybe Todd Stroger will remember that this is something in which he once claimed to believe.