

AUSTIN WEEKLY *news*



Balancing budget Preckwinkle's biggest challenge?

Cook County commissioners offer advice to nominee

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Should Toni Preckwinkle win the Cook County Board presidency in November, cleaning house will be no small task.

After campaigning in the primary as a smart reformer who would cut the fat from the Cook County budget, the 4th Ward alderman heads into the general election against Republican Roger Keats, a former state legislator.

Her victory seems likely, since a Democrat has held the presidency for the past 40 years - Preckwinkle has promised to repeal the remaining half-cent sales tax increase while saving money elsewhere in the budget to make up that difference.

In an enormous government with more than 23,000 employees and a \$3 billion budget that covers everything from highway maintenance to health care, all agree that this will be a monumental task.

"I've promised to [repeal the sales tax] incrementally," Preckwinkle cautioned Thursday. "It's not something I anticipate doing immediately."

Preckwinkle said she is putting policy teams together on four issues: criminal justice, health care, economic development and the Forest Preserve District. She said she has not targeted any specific areas to reduce bureaucracy as of yet.

A former board member, Mike Quigley, had advice for Preckwinkle's success.

"You have to look at the obstacles. If you want to know why these efforts fail, the bottom line is: People are protecting their turf, their power, and their jobs," said Quigley, who left the board when he was elected to Congress.

Quigley contended the problem with creating efficient government in Cook County is that - in contrast with city government, where power is concentrated under Mayor Daley - there are too many separate county agencies that aren't coordinated and organized.

"In the county, there are these little fiefdoms of separately elected officials who think that the laws, the budgets, don't apply to them," Quigley said.

"You still have townships, you still have a sheriff with a patrol division, you still have a highway department. The county was pretty much designed for 1890, not 2010."

Preckwinkle will need strong support from the majority of the 17 commissioners to get any reform measures passed. She doesn't represent a board district, so doesn't have voting privileges.

Several members of the "reform bloc" - a group of all five board Republicans and some Democrats who frequently voted against current President Todd Stroger's proposals - expressed willingness to work with Preckwinkle on creating government efficiency. Preckwinkle said she hopes to meet with each commissioner to learn about his or her agenda.

One commissioner, Gregg Goslin, a Glenview Republican, said, "I'm pretty optimistic that the next board is going to be a majority board of agents of change."

Republican Tony Peraica, who represents the western suburbs, said he thought Preckwinkle's reform efforts would be successful "if she sets the right tone initially and has an open-door policy and is willing to include this bipartisan coalition."

Dick Simpson, head of the department of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said Preckwinkle can work to expand the existing bloc with two new reform candidates: Jesus "Chuy" Garcia and state Rep. John Fritchey, both Chicago Democrats. Garcia beat the incumbent, well-financed Stroger loyalist Joseph Mario Moreno, and Fritchey won the primary to replace Forrest Claypool on the Northwest Side.

With these two new faces, "she should be able to have a stronger coalition," Simpson said.

But Jerry "Iceman" Butler, a South Side Democrat, expressed doubt that Preckwinkle could deliver on her promises and balance the budget at the same time. "When we get to this budget, which is the 2011 budget, that's when the fur will hit the fan," Butler said.

Simpson said Stroger can help Preckwinkle by allowing her access to information for early planning, but he hasn't been vigorous about sharing information in the past.

Stroger did not respond to calls for comment.