

## Lawmakers urge tax cap extension

By Ted Cox | Daily Herald Columnist

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Chicago politicians and grass-roots community groups led a call for extension of the 7 percent Expanded Homeowner Exemption Monday.

"This is not a North Side issue," said state Rep. John Fritchey, a Chicago Democrat. "It is an issue that encompasses the area."

First proposed six years ago by County Assessor James Houlihan, passed the following year and extended in 2007, the EHE - or "the 7 percent cap bill," as Fritchey called it - sets a limit of 7 percent on increases in the assessed value of homeowners' property from year to year in Cook County. Yet, the extension called for it to be phased out by setting diminishing maximum savings each year. It was to expire entirely in Chicago next year and is being phased out across the county, with the Northern suburbs the year after that and Western and Southern suburbs the year after that. Fritchey warned that puts local citizens at risk for massive property tax hikes, even as home values decline in a down economy.

"We've seen record foreclosures in every community," said state Rep. Kevin Joyce, a Southwest suburban Democrat from Worth.

"This affects everybody," Fritchey added. "We cannot tax the American dream out of existence."

County legislators pushed for an extension in the General Assembly earlier this year, but it got caught in the tussle over Gov. Quinn's proposed increase in the income tax, and both were brushed aside.

"Illinois has historically been a state that only reacts to a crisis, not common sense," Fritchey said.

He insisted it is not a sweetheart deal for Chicago or Cook County. "There was nothing in this legislation that made it special for Cook County. Any county that wanted to opt in, could opt in. But we have a unique method of assessing property in Cook County that was specifically tailored for this solution."

Because of the sheer size of Cook County, it is typically reassessed in regional districts, and the EHE was intended, in part, to make sure one district wouldn't take an unusually large hit in one year due to the luck of the draw. Fritchey, Joyce and North Side Chicago Alderman Eugene Schuler said that Chicago is at risk because its exemption was to expire first, but they insisted all Cook County homeowners have an interest in extending it.

Fritchey said he "absolutely" would be reaching out to suburban politicians and community groups to join their coalition to get the EHE extended.

"At a minimum, this is what we need to do, to extend it again," he said.

Houlihan expressed his support for the additional extension, with a spokesman saying, "He's with these guys 100 percent."

Barbara Head, president and founder of the Chicago-based Tax Reform Action Coalition, said the extension shouldn't apply only to homeowners in the city and the Cook suburbs, but that it should be extended to all properties to help businesses small and large in the tough economy.

"We need a safety net right now for homeowners," she said, but "this needs to apply to all properties. ... It's not divide and conquer."