



THE COUNTY LINE

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Preckwinkle cautious but confident as campaign gears up for GOP fight

By Alex Parker
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In her bid for the Democratic nomination for Cook County Board President, Alderman Toni Preckwinkle convinced voters she was the one to carry to the party's flag.

She ran on a platform of competent leadership and honest government.

If you ask her, that strategy worked just fine, thank you very much. So as she ventures on in the campaign against Republican nominee former state Sen. Roger Keats, don't expect too much to change.

"We're going to do the same thing we did in the primary, which is work hard in the county. We're not going to take anything for granted. We're going to try to be as many places as we can," she says.

The strategy is vague, short on details and almost sure to work in a county that has not elected a Republican to the helm in 40 years.

On paper, Keats and Preckwinkle are similar. Both have pledged to work with opposing factions and roll back the sales tax (Preckwinkle says she'd do that gradually. Keats wants to do it on Day One).

But while Keats paints Preckwinkle as a member of "the club," the Democratic party that has ruled Chicago politics for decades, she says she is less a political pawn and more a public servant, pointing to her 20 years in the City Council and time spent working for the community.

"I've spent my entire adult life in public service," she says. "I was a teacher, I worked for government, I worked for nonprofits, and for the last 20 years, I've been an alderman."

"That's not the choice he's made," she says of Keats, who has been out of politics for 16 years.

She's bullish about the potential of county government, pointing to new faces like state Rep. John Fritchey and former state Sen. Jesus "Chuy" Garcia. Fritchey is running unopposed for the seat of retiring Commissioner Forrest Claypool. Garcia knocked off Commissioner Joseph Mario Moreno, a strong Stroger supporter.

“I’m hopeful that with a lot of new talented people coming into the County Board, we’ll be able to move a public agenda forward that hasn’t been the case in the past,” Preckwinkle says. But despite sounding like the election is in the bag, she’s careful to note that she takes nothing for granted.

“We’re going to outwork everybody. We’re going to raise the resources we need to have an effective media campaign,” she says.

While the campaign heats up, the county board will consider two of Preckwinkle’s pet issues: the sales tax and the status of the independent board governing the county health system, which she is in favor of making permanent.

A measure to keep the health board permanent is sitting with the board’s Health and Hospitals committee. A motion to repeal the remaining half-penny sales tax hike was referred to the Finance Committee earlier this month.

If the county board signs off on those two measures, it won’t undercut her campaign, says Commissioner Larry Suffredin.

“I don’t think they’ll affect her campaign because she’s in favor of them,” he says. “I think if we would pass something before the election, I think Toni Preckwinkle would be in favor of that.”

The campaign has operated under the radar since Preckwinkle pulled off a decisive win Feb. 2. It held a strategy meeting last week at a downtown hotel. The campaign’s finance director Scott Kastrup says it’s raised about \$10,00 since the primary.