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Preckwinkle says independent candidates "critical" for future of health system

By Alex Parker
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Alderman Toni Preckwinkle repeated her calls yesterday to make the county's independent health board permanent.

And she says electing reform candidates to the Cook County Board is "critical" for the county's health care system.

Flanked by Democratic County Board candidates Dr. Victor Forys, running for Commissioner Liz Gorman's 17th District seat, and State Rep. John Fritchey, running to replace 12th District Commissioner Forrest Claypool, Preckwinkle said she supports staggered terms for health board members and that she hopes old Cook County Hospital will be preserved.

Preckwinkle supports the independent health board, created after the health system was wrested away from the County Board president's office when the sales tax was raised in 2008, because she says it can eliminate the problems that have historically hampered the health system.

"I think it's critical that we make it permanent. We continue to have professional management of our healthcare system and separate that professional management from the patronage and political influence that has damaged healthcare in the past," she said at a press conference at a downtown hotel.

Her opponents in the Democratic primary race say the health board should be evaluated at the end of its first term.

She said she supports term limits for health board members, who were appointed by County Board President Todd Stroger in 2008. The 11 members, who include medical professionals, union leaders and attorneys, end their first term in 2011, when board is due to sunset.

Stroger and others have criticized the health board for not being accountable to taxpayers, and for not being more diverse. Green Party candidate Tom Tresser supports adding community members and nurses to the board.

Preckwinkle says the board is accountable, because county commissioners must approve its budget.

Should she be elected president, Preckwinkle said she would abide by the health board's recommendations for changing health care delivery in the county. The sales tax rollback has increased speculation that Provident and Oak Forest Hospitals might close.

"I am committed to the independent governing board, and I am not a health care professional, so I count on them to make the decisions that are in the best interests of all the people," she said.

"I'm prepared to stand by any decision they're prepared to make."
Fritchey agreed that the independent board should be made permanent.

"You'd be hard pressed to find anybody in Cook County who would be reliant on the county health services that would rather have those decisions made by the 17 Cook County commissioners than the independent health board that we have right now," he said. "We need professionals making these decisions, which are life and death decisions."

Forys, a physician in Park Ridge, said he would add an important dynamic to the County Board.

"There are 17 commissioners on the County Board, and within my memory and the memory of other people, there has never been a medical professional," he said. "The only experience (other commissioners) have had with medicine is as a patient or a visitor."

Preckwinkle said she supports renovating old County Hospital for medical and administrative use, a proposal floated by the County Board in recent months.

The proposal calls for a \$107 million renovation of the vacant hospital, moving the health system's administrative offices into the building.

"I am frankly in favor of preservation, and that's the position I've had for some time," she said. "Restore the exterior, gut the interior and use it for public health purposes. That would be my preference."

But health system CEO William Foley and other health board members say they prefer to explore other options, including building a new facility on the Stroger Hospital campus. Consultants have deemed County Hospital to be unsuitable for modern medical needs.