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# Back to the scene of the crime

Published February 27, 2007

Virtually on the eve of the Chicago election, the Illinois Supreme Court issued a ruling that comes as a huge relief.

The law that says if you've been convicted of "any infamous crime, bribery, perjury or other felony," you can't be elected to the City Council. That law must be obeyed, the court said.

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The practical impact of the court ruling on Tuesday's election, however, is not quite as clear.

In two wards, former aldermen who were convicted of official corruption--Virgil Jones in the 15th and Ambrosio Medrano in the 25th--are blocked from running by virtue of the court ruling. So far, so good.

But their names will still appear on the ballot because the ruling came too late to print new ballots. Voters will be handed leaflets warning them that a vote for Medrano or for Jones won't be counted, election officials say.

Confusing, yes. But it gets worse: Two more aldermen who went to prison, Wallace Davis Jr. and Percy Giles, are still free to run for the City Council. Davis is running in the 2nd Ward and Giles in the 37th. Why? Because no one persisted in challenging them in court or at the Chicago Board of Elections.

People deserve second chances in life, but a corrupt former alderman doesn't deserve a chance to return to the scene of the crime, especially not in the Chicago City Council, which has been tarred so often by corrupt aldermen. Until a recent respite, the council for a quarter-century sent aldermen to prison at the rate of one a year.

The state Supreme Court ruling should bring more clarity in future cases in which an ex-con tries to run for municipal office. Local election boards have guidance to disqualify such candidates.

State law, though, needs to be broader. As it stands, the law prohibits ex-felons from holding municipal offices but not higher offices, such as governor. Rep. John Fritchey (D-Chicago) has introduced a bill that would bar all potential officeholders convicted of public corruption from regaining public office. The bill is expected to be heard by an Illinois House committee within the next week or two. It deserves wide support.

Meanwhile, there's the matter of Wallace Davis Jr. and Percy Giles.

If they were to win, a legal challenge would be likely. The fervent hope here is that voters will soundly repudiate them so the courts don't have to clean up a mess.

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In 2000, Percy Giles was sentenced to 3 years and 3 months in prison for taking \$10,000 in bribes and extorting \$81,200 to block the city's efforts to shut an illegal dump in his ward. He didn't just take money, he took money to let his community be a dumping ground.

In 1988, Wallace Davis Jr., was sentenced to 8 1/2 years in prison for taking a bribe, forcing his own niece to pay kickbacks to him for her job as his ward secretary and extorting money from the owners of a restaurant in his ward. When he was sentenced, the judge chided him for not showing any remorse.

On Tuesday, turn them away.

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