

Cook County voters, take a bow

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Among the axioms that mislead too many people are the lazy beliefs that (a) politicians are all alike, so (b) why bother to go to the polls? Those notions are dead wrong, as Wednesday's minor earthquake in Cook County government attests. Those in the County Building who cling to the old ways--patronage, waste, disdain for taxpayers—are finally on the run.

And voters can take all the credit. Last year they fired five of the County Board's 17 members. Voters had many reasons to be angry, but high on the list were the disastrous decline and sorry finances of the county's beleaguered Forest Preserve District. Worse, the County Board, which oversees the district, repeatedly failed to crack down on the rampant mismanagement there.

The district's chronic failures led to a resolution pushed by several reformers on the board asking Board President John Stroger to fire the district's top manager. That teed up a vote of no-confidence that Stroger couldn't afford to lose. When confronted with the embarrassing likelihood that he would lose it, he instead accepted the manager's resignation.

Stroger dodged a bullet--but the reformers should feel emboldened. The old County Board, with more lapdogs in dutiful service to Stroger's administration, wouldn't have had the moxie to ask him to dump one of his own top managers.

But it's a new day, with new members on the board awakening the veterans to the fact that they'll have to choose between Cook County's old-school past and their own political futures. Once voters realize how much impact their drive to reform the Cook County Board has had, they may well replace more of its calcified members.

Stroger has promised a national search for a new top manager at the forest preserves. Given the gem that the preserves once were and could be again--a nationally unmatched system of urban forests and waterways--there should be no shortage of applicants. What world-class specialist wouldn't want to rescue these 68,000 acres?

Nor, though, will there be any shortage of public scrutiny of how this position gets filled. This has to be a spectacular hire, not one

more retread from the usual list of friends and relatives.

To that end, Stroger's administration should be on notice: The candidates had better include no ward heelers, no sons or daughters of Cook County's cozy clout crowd, no in-laws or nephews or nieces, no somebodies somebody sent. The first step should be creation of a search committee exclusively from outside county government--representatives from such groups as the Civic Federation and Friends of the Forest Preserves, as well as academic experts in conservation and government finance.

The best possible manager should in turn demand that the Forest Preserve District no longer be a dumping ground for county officials' patronage hires, as it's been for sorry decades. And as Stroger himself suggested Wednesday, the arrival of a new manager likely means other officials' heads will roll.

The reformers didn't start out as a unified group in their quest to shake up the forest preserves. But if Wednesday's events teach anything, it's that they have to hang together or they'll all hang alone. Only by working as a group will they cast the winning votes and force the overdue actions that will begin to reform not just the Forest Preserve District, but all of Cook County's flabby, featherbedded government.

That is what voters rightly demanded. On Wednesday, they saw their revolution begin.