

## Shaking up Stroger's board

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Next month's elections may fall short of a revolution on the Cook County board.

But many believe Cook County Board President John Stroger's iron-clad grip on the board will weaken, especially after five incumbents were ousted in the March primaries.

The new blood, reformers on the board say, could mean more accountability on how the board spends \$2.9 billion--or more than \$400 of your money if you own a \$150,000 home.

It could open the budget process, put more heat on the Forest Preserve District and force a closer look at the workings of the new John H. Stroger Jr. Hospital of Cook County.

"What you are going to see is nothing like 'City Council wars,' but you will see shifting alliances," predicts Mike Quigley (D- Chicago), one of Stroger's main foes on the board. "There will be some close votes. Some very major programs will be dramatically altered."

By ousting nearly a third of the 17-member board last spring, voters were saying they were fed up with the scandal-plagued forest preserve, which the county had to bail out with \$13 million over the past two years, said Debra Shore, a member of the board of Friends of the Forest Preserves.

"The people are saying the neglect has to stop," she said.

Candidates in key races next month say they will spend as much as \$250,000 to reach voters--a substantial sum for a relatively low-profile government post.

One of the more closely watched races pits Melrose Park Mayor Ron Serpico, 50, against Riverside lawyer Anthony Peraica, 45, for the 16th District seat representing the western suburbs. Last spring, Peraica unseated longtime incumbent Al Carr (R-Cicero), a Republican who frequently supported Stroger.

"The gross mismanagement that has taken place at the Cook County level and at the Forest Preserve is shocking to one's conscience,"

Periaca said. "If you look at the corruption, nepotism, no-bid contracts, mismanagement of public lands, it's a series after series of scandals." But Periaca would not distance himself from the support he received from former Cicero Town President Betty Loren-Maltese, recently convicted for her involvement in a scheme to steal more than \$12 million from Cicero's treasury through a mobbed-up insurance firm. "I graciously accept endorsements from wherever I can get them," he said.

Peraica wants more county services privatized and better use of technology in Cook County courts.

If elected, Serpico said he will not come in with "guns blazing," but rather fall "in the middle of the pack." He wants to see more health clinics serving suburban areas and wants to improve the upkeep of the forest preserve. He would try to abolish the forest preserve police. Serpico defended his town's naming of an athletic field after his late father, Ralph Serpico, a twice-convicted felon with mob ties. "I love my father," Serpico said. "He did wrong, and he paid the price."

Carl Hansen (R-Mount Prospect), 76, who has represented the northwest suburbs since 1974, faces what could be a tough challenge from Brian McPartlin, a former White House advance man during the Clinton administration. New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton recently attended a fund-raiser for McPartlin, who also has received support from the Democratic National Committee.

Even though Hansen is a Republican and frequently bickers with Stroger, he is more of an obstructionist than a true reformer, McPartlin said. McPartlin, 36, also of Mount Prospect, said Hansen isn't well-known in his district and hasn't done enough to prevent the misuse of county funds.

Although he's a strong Democrat, McPartlin claims he won't be a rubber stamp for Stroger. He disagreed with the county's decision to build a domestic violence court at 612 S. Clinton, which will cost \$15 million more than the former Helene Curtis building along the river. Hansen simply points to his record to prove he has been a watchdog on county government. He fought a real estate transfer tax, sponsored an ethics code for the board, and pushed for a study that eventually led to the privatization of the county's golf courses.

Still, he thinks talk of reforming the board is overblown. "The chances of the pattern being significantly different on the county board are almost nil," he said.

That hasn't deterred Robert Martwick, 36, a village of Norridge trustee running for the seat held for two terms by Republican Peter Silvestri (R-Chicago). Martwick wants to put a lid on taxes and increase competitive bidding for county contracts. A former prosecutor, he wants to devote more resources to domestic violence court.

Silvestri, 45, the president of the village of Elmwood Park, said he has a record of fighting for more openness on the board, opposing tax increases and looking for ways to cut waste. "There is potential to propose some real change because of the real independence of many of the new commissioners," he said.

Even Stroger says he welcomes "progressive change." He says he will work with the new board members to make county government more efficient. But he says the county is in better shape than when he first became president eight years ago. He points to the soon-to- open Stroger Hospital as one of his greatest achievements.