

Our choices for clean water

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Largely out of sight--if not always out of sniffing range--the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District has a crucial environmental mission: By processing 1.4 billion gallons of wastewater daily and collecting storm water runoff that can carry dangerous pollutants, the district tries to protect the water quality of Lake Michigan and this region's rivers. This is a mammoth if obscure enterprise: The agency's Stickney plant, one of seven that the district operates, is the world's largest wastewater treatment facility.

A nine-member board of commissioners oversees the district--its 900-square-mile service area, roughly the shape of Cook County, includes Chicago and 125 suburbs--as well as the district's billion-dollar budget. Board members serve staggered terms, with three seats up for election every two years. Nine Democrats are competing in the March 21 primary for three positions. From this unusually strong field, the Tribune endorses three candidates:

Priority One this year is the nomination of Debra Shore, a founding director of Friends of the Forest Preserves and editor of Chicago Wilderness magazine. Shore is a deeply respected and powerful voice in Chicago-area conservation circles, and her concern for the environmental quality of the district's land holdings--many of which citizens use just as they do forest preserves--would make her a welcome addition to a board that now devotes most of its energy to engineering issues. Shore has excellent ideas for policy changes to reduce the worsening impact of rainwater runoff as more and more of the Chicago area is covered by buildings and pavement.

Another promising aspirant is attorney and law school instructor Lewis W. Powell III, whose extensive background in city planning, real estate development and other urban management issues would be a strong plus. Powell wants to educate citizens about the district's mission (including its nearly completed "Deep Tunnel" project, a public works extravaganza intended to reduce residential flooding). He's also especially interested in keeping industrial wastes out of freshwater supplies. His background in assuring that minority- and women-owned businesses get fair shots at public contracts is one more positive attribute he would bring to the board.

Board President Terrence J. O'Brien, seeking his fourth term on the

board, has won high marks from the Civic Federation of Chicago for financial stewardship, including (are you listening, Cook County government?) a reduction of the district's property tax levy. O'Brien offers taxpayers a unique combination of virtues: He has a good grasp of technical issues, a proven record of paying close attention to affirmative action and a respect for taxpayers' dollars.

Other candidates include board incumbent James Harris Sr., Barrett Pedersen, Dean Maragos, Patricia Horton, Boguslaw "Bogie" Stefanski and Frank Avila, whose father, M. Frank Avila, currently is a member of the board.