

## Stroger, Quigley 'part ways' over forest preserve cash

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It was old-school Cook County politics Wednesday, with Board President Todd Stroger and his now-former ally Commissioner Mike Quigley shouting at each other as the board approved a \$13.3 million transfer of funds from the forest preserve to the regular county government.

"You can stand up with me one day and talk about me the next," Stroger complained. "The same day! -- Your consistency has been being on my side and still stabbing me in the back at the same time."

"Does the expression, 'Get over it,' mean anything to you?" retorted Quigley (D-Chicago).

The fight, which continued for several minutes, seemed to mark an end to what has been an unusual political alliance between Stroger, the son of ward politics, and Quigley, an independent vowing reform.

Quigley promised to oppose Stroger's budget when it comes up for a vote this month.

"From here, we part ways," Quigley said.

The sticking point was Stroger's backing of the board's 11-to-5 vote that ordered the forest preserve district to give the county \$13.3 million. The cash will help stave off deep cuts to health services and law enforcement proposed in the 2007 county budget.

The county and forest preserve district governments are run by the same 17-member board and president. In 2001 and 2002, after an audit revealed the district had been operating on deficit budgets for years, the board voted twice to transfer county money to the district so it could stay afloat.

Whether those transfers were loans to be paid back or one-time grants was the subject of much debate Wednesday.

"It defies logic to think that anyone would support a transfer that was not going to be repaid," said Commissioner Gregg Goslin (R-Glenview). "It was always, in my mind, a loan."

"There was no discussion of a loan ever being repaid," countered finance committee chairman John Daley (D-Chicago). "If you listen to the tapes, you'll hear that."

The forest preserve has the money to spare, proponents argued. After Supt. Steve Bylina was installed to fix the district's problems, it has earned more and spent less than budgeted for the past few years. Officials said \$22 million in surplus money has piled up in the capital improvement fund and they have no immediate plans to spend it.

"We have not clearly identified what manner it would be best spent," Bylina said. "There is always a need, as we all know, to make improvements."

To appease Quigley, Stroger had proposed before the meeting the money be tied to a land swap, with the county giving some of the unused land around Oak Forest Hospital to the forest preserve. Several commissioners objected, saying either the land was more valuable than \$13.3 million or wasn't valuable enough.

The final version of the ordinance said the forest preserve would get some county land worth \$13.3 million by the end of 2008, but it did not specify what land.

The raid on the forest preserve funds infuriated Ben Cox, executive director of the Friends of the Forest Preserve.

"The bank managers became the bank robbers today," Cox said. "People of the county deserve each of the services they receive from the money they pay into these taxes. Health care and trees, they deserve both."

But South Side Commissioner Deborah Sims (D-Chicago) said the board had to set priorities.

"Ben Cox is concerned about forest preserve issues. We're concerned about life-and-death issues," Sims said. "We're not going to put trees over people."

Opposing commissioners argued the transfer amounted to a hidden tax increase. They argued the forest preserve district has a surplus only because the board has voted to raise its property tax levy every year for years.

"This is your tax hike," Quigley said. "No slight of hand changes that." Stroger later said he disagreed with that, and thought of the money as a loan that was being repaid.