

The Works

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That Funny Opaque Kind of Transparency

Alderman Rey Colon wants to know if voters in the 35th Ward approve of their TIF, but what does he plan to do if they don't?

By Ben Joravsky

In the view of many in the 35th Ward, Rey Colon must have something up his sleeve. Most aldermen are secretive about tax increment financing districts in their ward. But Colon's bringing his TIF to everyone's attention with an advisory referendum on the March 21 ballot: "Shall the Alderman of the 35th Ward support commercial and residential redevelopment of the Fullerton/Milwaukee/Armitage TIF (Tax Increment Finance) District?"

"I want to see what the people think," Colon says. "It's kind of a free way for me to poll the voters."

A TIF, as I seem to be forever explaining these days, is an economic development scheme in which the city diverts property tax dollars within a specified area into a fund controlled by the local alderman and the city's planning department. Every now and then a TIF funds a worthwhile endeavor—saving a landmark, building a school. But they're so poorly regulated that far more often they do more harm than good. Given the way that TIFs have been abused, it would make more sense for Colon to ask voters to support abolishing the 35th Ward TIF altogether.

Fat chance of that. TIFs are the only planning subsidy in town, so aldermen either go along with them or watch development dollars go to other wards. There are now 140 TIF districts devouring well over \$300 million a year in property taxes. "I didn't create this system," Colon says. "But I have to play in it."

The TIF running through the 35th Ward is typically vexing. Created in 2000 by Colon's predecessor, Vilma Colom, it was primarily intended for commercial development along Milwaukee between Fullerton and Armitage.

In 2005 the city expanded the TIF to stretch along Belmont to Pulaski in the 31st Ward. Then it approved TIF expenditures of several million dollars to help finance the transformation of the old Florsheim shoe factory on Belmont near Pulaski into a loft condominium complex. Thus property tax dollars diverted for commercial property in the 35th Ward wound up subsidizing upscale housing in the 31st. Even Colon's not sure why that development got bumped to the front of the line. "I think [powerful 31st Ward alderman Ray Suarez] got his proposal in first," he says drily.

Last year's boundary change also added the MegaMall shopping center at 2500 N. Milwaukee to the TIF. Back in 2000 Alderman Colom and the city's planning department somehow managed to leave the mall out of the original TIF—even though practically all the other properties on that stretch of Milwaukee were included and the mall is exactly the sort of property TIFs are intended to spruce up. "The mall should never have been left out of the TIF," says Colon. "I asked the city to put it in."

It's not at all clear why TIF money is needed in the area to begin with—the real estate market's booming without it. But according to Colon the city plans to acquire the MegaMall, which is closed while its owner works out problems with the building department, and solicit proposals to redevelop the property using TIF funds.

Members of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, the area's largest community group, are going door-to-door asking residents to vote no on the referendum. "It's such a vague question," says Adrixia Valentin, an association member. "Voting yes



Rey Colon, the embattled MegaMall

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is like giving Colon a blank check. We need to know what he has in mind." Valentin fears that Colon would use a yes vote as a cover for justifying further upscale development. "The area's already gentrifying," she says. "We don't need to force more people out."

Colon insists he has nothing specific in mind. "If voters vote yes, I have an idea of what voters want." And if they vote no? "Something's going to come. If they vote no, the process will continue."

Then why hold an advisory referendum at all?

"I want a sense of what people think," he says. "I want people to know about the TIF. The money's there—it's going to be spent. I know there's always that suspicion with this [aldermanic] gig—everybody thinks you're making deals. But I want things to be transparent."

Who's Daley's Man?

Over 23 years ago a relatively unknown south-side committeeman named John Stroger stood before his precinct workers in his Cottage Grove office and demanded that they bring out the vote for state's attorney Richard M. Daley.

It was a kamikaze mission, and everyone knew it. Support for Congressman Harold Washington, running against Richard M. Daley and incumbent mayor Jane Byrne in the 1983 Democratic mayoral primary, was mounting throughout black Chicago. Washington wound up clobbering Daley in Stroger's ward, as well as most of the south and west sides. And Stroger spent much of Washington's tenure in purgatory, trying to win back the mayor's support.

Now fast-forward to the current Democratic primary, where Stroger, the incumbent Cook County Board president, is in a tough reelection race against board commissioner Forrest Claypool, who's running as a reformer though he spent much of the 90s as a City Hall insider. How has Daley repaid Stroger for his years of loyalty? "Forrest was my chief of staff," Daley told reporters while ostensibly endorsing the incumbent. "He worked very hard. Very honest, very dedicated. And he did a good job as Park District superintendent."

Put aside the question of whether Claypool really did a good job at the Chicago Park District, where over the last 12 or so years fees have been steadily rising even as programs have been cut. And who knows how Stroger's stroke will affect the race. The Stroger nonendorsement endorsement was classic Daley. Stroger is only the latest—behind Dawn Clark Netsch, Paul Vallas, and John Schmidt, to

name just a few—to be betrayed by his supposed friend on the fifth floor. "Daley's sending out a message: I don't care who you vote for, Stroger or Claypool," says one old south-side ally of Stroger.

After being criticized on black call-in shows, Daley tried to make up for his backhandedness by praising Stroger as someone who "always stood up for working families and those threatened to be left behind in our society." But this testimonial came at the opening of the new Avalon branch library in Stony Island, on the far south side. If Daley really wanted to send a message of support for his embattled ally he'd do the equivalent of what Stroger did for him in 1983: make the pitch on the north lakefront, Claypool's home turf.

But why should he? No matter who wins Daley knows he'll get his way. And just to make sure, his brother, commissioner John Daley, chairman of the board's finance committee, will be watching closely.

"No matter what you do for him, with Daley it's always about Daley," says the Stroger ally. "I don't know why these guys never learn."

The Real County Board Race to Watch

Voters looking to put a little independence on the Cook County Board of Commissioners might as well sit out the board president's race. But voters in the Seventh District, where independent Leonard Dominguez is challenging Joseph Mario Moreno, have a choice. As Dominguez, a retired high school principal who was a top aide to former school board president Gery Chico, sees it, he could be the board's swing vote: "I'm the Sandra Day O'Connor of the Cook County Board," he says. "I'd vote issue by issue because I won't be in anybody's camp."

He certainly won't owe either Stroger or Claypool if he gets elected. Stroger supports Moreno, who's been loyal to the board president, and Claypool doesn't support anyone—he can't afford to offend any of the local powers behind Moreno.

Backed by 22nd Ward alderman Ricardo Munoz, Dominguez has teamed up with state rep candidate Francisco Rodriguez and state senate candidate Oscar Torres to form an independent coalition in Pilsen and Little Village. (The Seventh District stretches from the city's near southwest side into Cicero.) "Let's be honest, there's no one on the County Board who will oppose the status quo if their guy gets elected," Dominguez says. "When you go it alone, nobody owns you." ■

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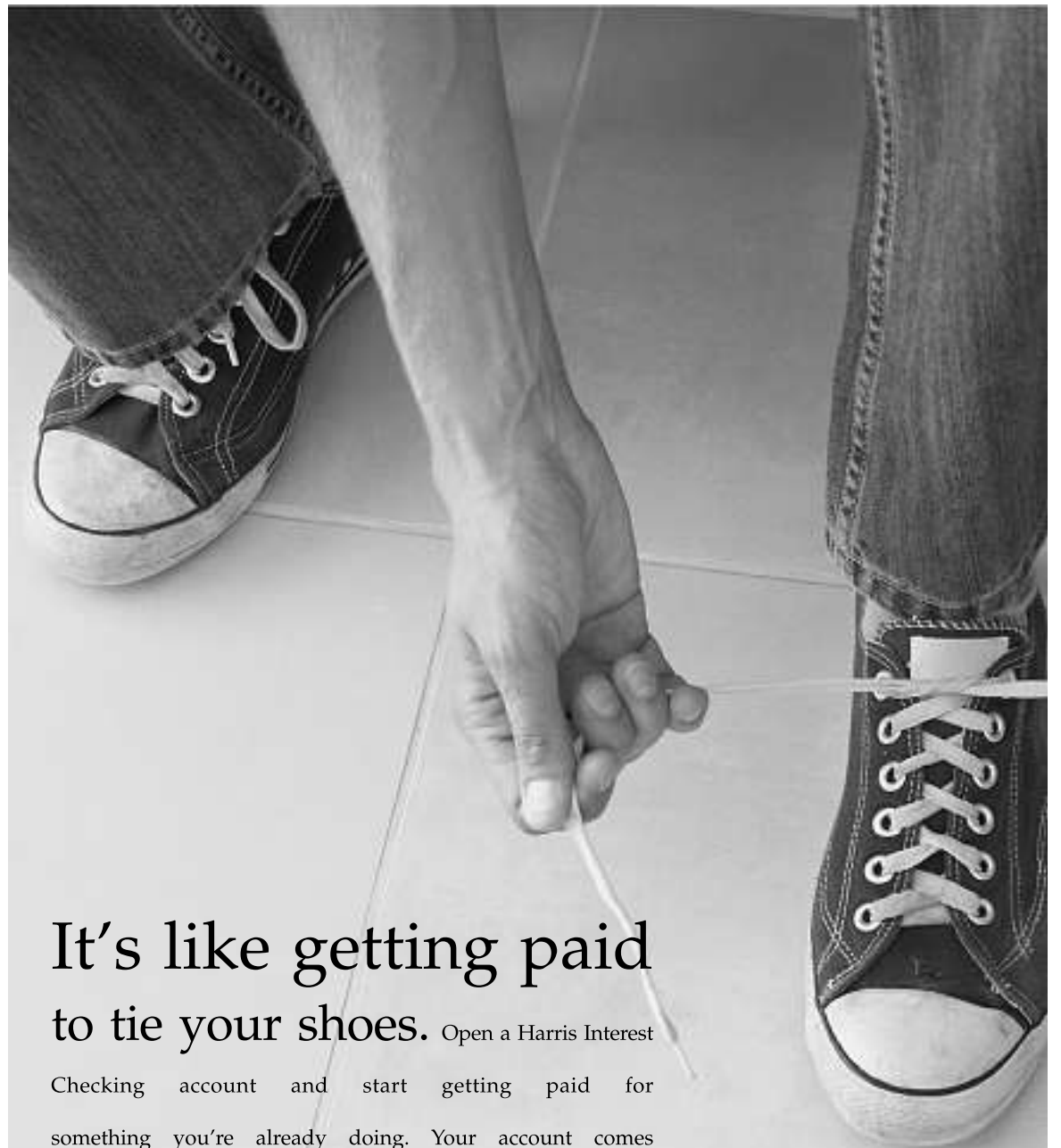
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