

2 aldermen appointed by Emanuel face challenges at ballot box

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The two aldermen appointed by Mayor Rahm Emanuel since taking office will face voters for the first time next week, and the results could help determine how strong the mayor's lock will be on the Chicago City Council should he win re-election.

On the Northwest Side, Emanuel picked somebody that somebody sent when he appointed Deb Mell, the daughter of longtime powerhouse Ald. Dick Mell, to succeed her father on the council.

On the South Side, the mayor chose somebody that nobody sent when he appointed Natasha Holmes, a former Illinois Department of Transportation special projects manager who was off the political radar, to replace embattled Ald. Sandi Jackson.

Chicago Forward, a super political action committee that has raised more than \$2.4 million to spend in support of the mayor's agenda and allies, is backing Mell and Holmes.

33rd Ward

Ald. Deb Mell is trying to extend her family's control of the 33rd Ward that started when her father was first elected to the council in 1975.

Dick Mell, a proud partisan of patronage, went on to a storied City Hall career and helped put his son-in-law, Rod Blagojevich, in the governor's mansion. Later, they had a falling out that played a role in Blagojevich being impeached and sent to prison on federal corruption charges. Dick Mell still runs the ward's Democratic political operation while working as a City Hall lobbyist.

Campaign finance reports indicate that for more than a year, Dick Mell was providing his daughter with campaign office space worth \$300 a month, or \$3,600 a year. Lobbyists are limited to contributing \$1,500 a year to an individual alderman.

As United Working Families, a pro-union group backing one of her opponents, prepared to file a complaint with the City Council inspector general, the campaign finance paperwork was amended to show that the space was contributed by the 33rd Ward Democratic Ward Organization run by Dick Mell.

But it's unclear whether that change helps Ald. Mell avoid running afoul of ethics rules because property records list her father as owning the building.

Beyond that, state records show that Dick Mell made a direct \$2,500 campaign contribution to his daughter's fund in September. Ald. Deb Mell told the Tribune she wasn't aware of the donation. "I'm going to return that contribution," she told the Tribune, agreeing that amount exceeded the lobbyist contribution limit. "I'm glad you pointed that out to me."

Opponents Tim Meegan and Annisa Wanat each have made the campaign space contribution limit an issue in the race.

"How can the 33rd Ward Democratic organization in-kind contribute the rent for that property when they don't own the property?" asked Meegan, a high school teacher backed by the Chicago Teachers Union. "Richard Mell owns the property."

Wanat, a nonprofit consultant and local school council member, questioned how Deb Mell can grapple with the issues of multi-billion dollar city budget when she doesn't know what's going on within her own campaign fund. Ald. Mell, for her part, dismissed the campaign office issue as "a reporting error" and added that "I'm really sorry that it happened."

Both Meegan, 39, and Wanat, 41, note that Mell has consistently voted to back Emanuel's initiatives, including the scandal-plagued red light camera program that the mayor continues to support. Mell once declared "I love the red light cameras."

Mell's critics who back Meegan pounced again Monday after discovering an advertisement for Mell's campaign on the Cleveland Elementary School website. After the complaints surfaced, the ad quickly came down. Mell said she called Chicago Public Schools to complain as soon as she learned about it, and district officials later said the matter was under investigation.

Mell, 46, the council's first openly lesbian member and a forceful advocate for legalizing same-sex marriage while in the General Assembly, counters that she grew up in the ward, knows the issues and is not the same type of politician as her father.

7th Ward

The 7th Ward has dealt with years of political strife. On Tuesday, Holmes faces seven challengers, including the former chief of staff to Sandi Jackson, who along with her husband, former U.S. Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., was convicted on federal charges related to the misuse of \$750,000 in campaign cash. In 2007, Sandi Jackson defeated Darcel Beavers, who had replaced her father Bill Beavers — an unabashed practitioner of old-school patronage who later went to prison on tax evasion charges — after he was elected to the Cook County Board.

"People don't want anyone associated with the Jacksons or the Beavers in the office, and there is a great deal of tension around that, because people feel like those two leaders, those two entities, had self-serving interests, and that their interest was greater than that of the everyday person," said LaShonda "Shonnie" Curry, one of Holmes' challengers.

The redrawn ward includes parts of seven neighborhoods, with South Chicago at its center, and saw a population decline of more than 27,000 within its current boundaries between 2000 and 2010, according to statistics compiled by the **Chicago Rehab Network**. As a result, the campaign has been just as much about economic circumstances and crime as it has been about clout.

Once considered a go-to area for middle class African Americans, the ward is pockmarked with foreclosed and abandoned homes, as well as empty storefronts along 75th and 79th Streets. Some hope for an economic boost has been placed in the massive Chicago Lakefront Development now underway south of 79th.

"I know there are a lot of challenges in the 7th Ward, but those challenges are also opportunities, and what I've tried to do over the course of my tenure is really try to better engage the community, because all of us here agree

we've seen the decline in the community and we've seen the loss of investment and attention to our neighborhoods," said Holmes, 39, who was appointed by Emanuel in February 2013 and has since been sworn in as a lawyer, in a recent forum before the Tribune editorial board.

Holmes is not yet a household name and there are so many candidates, it could prove tough for someone to get the majority needed to win outright Tuesday. The contest is more likely to go to a runoff campaign culminating on April 7.

Also running are Keiana Barrett, 42, former chief of staff for Sandi Jackson; Curry, 41, a CPS administrator; Flora "Flo" Digby, 53, a construction company finance director; Gregory Mitchell, 45, an information technology manager at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange; Joseph J. Moseley II, 58, a retired Chicago police homicide detective and brother of former U.S. Sen. Carol Moseley Braun; Margie Reid, 54, a community organizer; and Bernie Riley, 74, a retired assistant city computer manager.

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