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Garcia Proposes Restricting Campaign Donations to County Assessor.

Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia filed an ordinance Thursday that would bar attorneys, law firms and other businesses that file property tax assessment appeals from contributing to the political campaigns of the county assessor.

He will introduce the measure when the board meets on July 19. The same day, Berrios is scheduled to appear before the full board during a meeting of the finance committee, where he’ll testify about assessments produced by his office.

Garcia, a former Chicago mayoral candidate, was among the first commissioners to push a resolution last week calling on Berrios to testify in the wake of the Tribune series “The Tax Divide.” The investigation documented deep flaws in assessments under Berrios that punished the poor while giving wealthy homeowners financial breaks.

The new measure, Garcia said, stems from findings in the series that revealed a steep increase in property tax appeals at a time when the bulk of campaign contributions Berrios collected came from property tax attorneys or other businesses involved in the appeals industry. As part of a collaboration with the University of Chicago’s Municipal Finance Center, the Tribune found that residential appeals make an already unequal system more unfair.

“The series the Tribune published in collaboration with other experts, including the University of Chicago, has raised many questions about the system,” Garcia told the Tribune. “I’ve been getting calls and questions from my constituents who appear to have been impacted. Just reading about how much money has been raised, it’s begging for answers. That’s why we’re looking forward to the assessor’s appearance.”

Garcia represents and lives in Little Village, a neighborhood where homes were routinely overvalued by the assessor, according to a Tribune analysis of more than 100 million property tax records. More affluent neighborhoods, meanwhile, were undervalued.

Known as regressivity, these types of disparities in the assessments led to inequities in property tax bills. That finding was documented by the Tribune’s analysis as well as the U. of C. study on appeals done in conjunction with the newspaper.

The county assessor has long been a relatively low-profile elected position. But among insiders, it is considered one of the most powerful political offices in the state, affecting the interests of real estate developers, law firms and wealthy individuals.

The ordinance limiting contributions to the assessor is among a growing list of headaches for Berrios, who is also the Cook County Democratic Party chairman.

State Sen. Daniel Biss, D-Evanston, a candidate for governor, also wants limits on contributions to local assessors from tax attorneys who appeal assessments as well as other changes to the state’s

property tax system.

And, last week, the Tribune learned that the inspector general for Cook County has begun investigating issues raised in the Tribune's series.

Berrios and Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, also a Democrat, have agreed to bring in a third party to examine the county's property tax system. The effort appears to include all aspects of the county's complex system rather than focusing solely on the assessor's office.

Contacted for comment on Garcia's proposed ordinance, Berrios' campaign spokesperson, Jacob Kaplan, said the assessor had not been contacted about the legislation and hadn't seen a copy of it.

"We would be happy to review it, and we always follow the law," Kaplan said in a written statement. "However, any ordinance, or, indeed, any legislation should apply equally to all officials — including the Cook County commissioners."

Garcia, who said he shared the new ordinance with Commissioners Larry Suffredin and John Fritchey, said he was open to including other officials in the legislation but pointed out that "no one has a role as unique as the assessor's office."

by Jason Grotto

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