

'Our taxes are too high': Southland leaders give Cook County reps an earful about taxes, incentives

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Ted Slowik



I appreciate the efforts of Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle to gather input from stakeholders for a new strategic plan. I really do.

But if politics interferes with good policy, I feel like all the planning in the world is merely an exercise in futility.

Preckwinkle is fresh off an election victory last month that saw her win 58.6 percent of the vote in the Democratic primary against former Chicago Alderman Bob Fioretti . Since no Republican opponent will appear on ballots, Preckwinkle is virtually assured to win her third term in November.

Preckwinkle's office is doing a sort of victory lap around the county this month by holding a series of "community conversations" to develop a "policy roadmap" that will help guide the county through the next four years.

Chicago's Bronzeville and Rogers Park neighborhoods have hosted listening sessions, and others are planned for Des Plaines and Maywood. Thursday night, I attended one at South Suburban College in South Holland.

Preckwinkle did not attend the meeting, which was hosted by several surrogates who are employed by the president's office. They wanted to hear from community members on a range of topics, including crime, health and wellness, the environment and sustainability, public infrastructure and county operations.

"We don't want this to be another plan that sits on the shelf and collects dust," said Lanetta Haynes Turner, Preckwinkle's deputy chief of staff.

Several Southland mayors, a state lawmaker and many regional officials attended, and they all emphasized two related concerns: Taxes and economic development.

The crowd of 50 or so attendees broke up into smaller groups, and most of the participants gathered around a table in the Mi-Jack Conference Room to talk about taxes and incentives.

Preckwinkle representatives asked people around the table about their concerns and took note of their responses.

"Our taxes are too high," Lynwood Mayor Eugene Williams said.

Other municipal officials said they have trouble attracting businesses to their communities. Companies considering southern Cook County often find the business climate more attractive in northwest Indiana or Will County, they said. Economic incentives are helpful, but the Southland needs more help because tax rates here are higher than in other parts of the county.

"It's not fair or equitable across the county," said Kristi DeLaurentiis, executive director of the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association.

Preckwinkle's representatives seemed sincere about wanting to hear more about the concerns of Southland officials.

"That's the kind of stuff we're looking for," Al Kendall, a Preckwinkle special assistant, said.

Incentives make investment more attractive, said John Watson, South Holland's economic development director. But the county's complicated incentives create a perception of red tape and bureaucracy.

"When a business is looking to make a decision, there's a level of expertise needed to navigate through all these things," Watson said.

Some officials expressed frustration that sometimes the county solicits opinions from constituents then fails to act on their concerns. State Rep. Will Davis, D-Harvey, said Preckwinkle and others ignored pleas from the south suburbs to include the proposed third airport near Peotone in the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's 2010 comprehensive plan for the seven-county region, "Go to 2040."

"The president's office doesn't seem to care about what the people who live out here want," Davis said. "At what point will that office actually listen to what these folks want?"

Thursday's listening session seemed like a continuation of an ongoing conversation about taxes and incentives between Cook County and south suburban municipal officials.

The Cook County Board last month voted to require private developers to pay prevailing wages and hire apprentices in order to take advantage of popular property-tax incentive programs.

In an extraordinary show of unity, dozens of south suburban mayors urged commissioners to delay a vote or reconsider the requirements. Mayors said the policy changes would crush new business investment if they take effect Sept. 1 as scheduled.

"I think there's going to be a crisis if we don't address that," DeLaurentiis said.

The county board went ahead and voted 10-4 to adopt the requirements. On Thursday, officials urged Preckwinkle's representatives to use data to study how the changes will impact taxes and development in the Southland.

"All these impacts need to be looked at holistically," DeLaurentiis said.

For instance, ever since Cook County voted in 2016 to raise the minimum wage to \$13 an hour by 2020, Park Forest businesses have been hiring more workers from outside Cook County, said Sandra Zoellner, the village's assistant director of economic development and planning.

"Employees are coming from Indiana, where the wages are lower," Zoellner said.

Municipal officials offered other suggestions for leveling the playing field and improving the county's complex system of tax incentives. The county's practice of assessing vacant commercial properties at a lower rate removes the incentive for owners to occupy empty storefronts, DeLaurentiis said.

"There is no one-size fits all solution," she said.

Some said the county's incentive programs are inconsistently funded.

"(Money) comes down in clusters," said Andrea Paxton, Harvey Area Chamber of Commerce president. "Especially around election time, so much money is put into things. Then it halts. There's no sustainability."

Some said trade unions that supported the new prevailing-wage requirements may not have considered the consequences of how increased costs of construction projects will discourage development.

"I'm for unions, but the way they came in was wrong," Ford Heights Mayor Annie Coulter said.

After two hours of discussion, I left South Suburban College feeling like municipal officials and economic development boosters were sharing their concerns with the wrong people.

I'm confident the staff members who work for Preckwinkle will do a fine job assembling all the comments and feedback into a nice report that will become part of a "policy roadmap" that will

help Preckwinkle guide the county through the next four years.

But I wondered what good that will do if elected county commissioners ignore the administrative recommendations and adopt policies that seem designed to benefit their political supporters more than their constituents.

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