

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 24 October 2012 11:59

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It doesn't take a genius to see through the “Clean the Slate” effort. Its newsletter, promoting 23 candidates for the Rock Island County Board, asks: “Tired of one party controlling all jobs in the county? Unless you are related to or know key people in the county government; your chances of being hired or promoted are unlikely.”

There's no mention of party affiliation – and no branding by the Rock Island County Republicans – in the newsletter, which notes that it was paid for by the Clean the Slate PAC. On the other hand, its Web site (CleanSlate2012.net) includes a photo showing the Rock Island County Republicans logo, and the county-party Web site includes a link to Clean the Slate.

Even if the connections aren't explicit, Clean the Slate is a pretty naked attempt to recast the county-board election in nonpartisan, good-government terms. Republicans are clearly hoping that common-sense critiques will loosen the grip held on the body by the Democratic party.

Yet you'd be hard-pressed to argue that the initiative doesn't have valid points. The 25-seat Rock Island County Board presently has four Republican members, and the issue is less philosophical uniformity than organizational comfort. Because most county boards operate with little public or media scrutiny, the absence of oversight or internal opposition can result in their members acting with collective near-impunity. And Clean the Slate has articulated a handful of areas in which the Rock Island County Board needs improvement – from being more flexible with public comment to stopping nepotism to ending the practice of paid absenteeism for board members.

It's a smart approach that's likely to appeal to many conscientious liberals. Given Rock Island County's strong Democratic history, it would be foolish to expect Clean the Slate to produce a GOP takeover of the county board. But several statewide and local Republican candidates performed strongly in Rock Island County in 2010, and the county party organization under chair Susan Carpentier (first elected in 2006) appears serious about not letting Democrats take any elected office for granted.

In 2008, only two of 14 county-board races were contested. In 2010, all 12 were. And this year, Clean the Slate is fielding candidates for 23 of the 25 seats.

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Obviously, the county board was never in play for Rock Island County Republicans when they didn't bother to run anybody against the Democrats. Clean the Slate shows that the organization is making far more than a token effort, though; even in such a heavily Democratic county, one could see the GOP making significant gains by focusing on the perils of sustained one-party rule.

The *River Cities' Reader* interviewed four of the Clean the Slate candidates, and it was refreshing that even though the initiative has four components to its mission statement, there was notable variance among individuals' positions. The mission includes the vague pledges of transparency and new hiring guidelines, along with more-concrete promises to eliminate board-member salaries in favor of per-meeting pay and to reduce the board's size from 25 to 15 people. Yet the people to whom I talked expressed differences in how they would tackle those issues.

That might reflect the fact that the mission statement was developed by the candidates themselves after they were recruited. “We signed on, and then had a lot of group discussion to decide what our goals were going to be,” said Kevin Goveia, who is running in District 16.

While all four supported eliminating the \$2,400 base salary for county-board members, for example, they disagreed whether to get rid of health-insurance and pension benefits for board members. (In May, the county board established that base salary, with an additional \$100 per diem for meetings – effective on December 1. If a member were to attend 36 board and committee meetings in a year, they would be paid a total of \$6,000.)

Goveia said he might support allowing board members to be eligible for health insurance – if they pay higher premiums and co-pays. But he said he favors eliminating pension benefits except for the full-time board chair.

Mark Archibald, from District 3, said he favors maintaining both health-insurance and pension benefits for board members, although he was open to increasing their contributions. “We have to have some motivation for good people to want to do this kind of work,” he said. “It is a motivation to do good work.” (Archibald said he has a disability and has difficulty getting health insurance.)

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Both John “Mike” McColl (the current county-board member from District 12) and Linda Soyke Haake (the Clean the Slate candidate from District 20) said they favor eliminating both health-insurance and pension benefits for board members.

The Clean the Slate mission includes reducing board size from 25 to 15, but an advisory referendum on the November 6 ballot is more specific, asking voters whether they support having three districts electing five members each.

It was clear that one talking point for Clean the Slate is advocating for districts with multiple members rather than the current single-member districts. Several candidates cited the examples of multi-member districts having benefits when a board member leaves town for the winter, or when a constituent has a conflict with his or her board member.

But Haake said she supports retaining single-member districts, and both she and Archibald said they were concerned that large districts would make it difficult for some populations to get representation on the board. Goveia said he could support either multi- or single-member districts. And while McColl was the strongest advocate for larger districts with several members apiece, he said he wasn't tied to one specific configuration.

On hiring practices, nepotism was a universal concern. The Clean the Slate newsletter targets County Board Chair Jim Bohnsack specifically, saying that his son-in-law and niece were hired for county positions, and that the firm employing his daughter-in-law became the county's outside auditor.

Haake said that although she doesn't know of specific examples of nepotism elsewhere in county government, she suspects it's common at Hope Creek Care Center: “You look at the employee list, and there's so many people with the same names.”

McColl said he believes the county should not hire any immediate relative of another county employee. The other three candidates said they thought that was too restrictive.

There was some agreement on specific measures. The four to whom I talked all supported

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eliminating the requirement of two business days' notice for a citizen to address the county board – especially, they said, because that deadline often passes before the full board agenda is available. County-board meetings are held on Tuesday, and the county Web site states: “All requests to address the Board must be received in writing no later than the Friday prior to the Board Meeting.” Republicans feel this requirement is a violation of the Illinois Open Meetings Act, which says, “Any person shall be permitted an opportunity to address public officials” – although it adds “under the rules established and recorded by the public body.”

The four candidates also supported having the county post notices of all job openings – not merely those whose postings are required.

The lack of unanimity on solutions for all perceived problems is less important than the fact that the issues are being raised. What matters, Archibald said, is making sure these things are discussed and addressed. “Overall, what we need to concentrate more on is making sure that things are public,” he said. “We can do a lot in changing the perception of how this county is run by just being more open with people.”

And the reality is that even if a Republican majority is unlikely, the party's efforts are already paying some dividends.

McColl said that because of questions he's asked, the county has begun enforcing its policy on credit-card usage, and it has developed a petty-cash policy.

The new part-salary, part-per-diem pay schedule for county-board members was a clear response to concerns Republicans raised about board members being paid for meetings they didn't attend.

And the resolution (passed this month) to put a referendum on the April ballot concerning single-member county-board districts is an obvious riposte to the board-size-reduction proposal on the November ballot.

So while Republicans aren't in charge of the Rock Island County Board and probably won't grab

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control on November 6, it's clear they've gotten the board's attention.