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Final Edition

**Assessor slams Madigan tax plan; Claim it aids law firm clients scorned**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD -- An analysis by Cook County Assessor James Houlihan found that Loop high-rises represented by House Speaker Michael Madigan's law firm would save hundreds of thousands of dollars more under the speaker's plan to cap property tax assessments than under stalled legislation backed by Houlihan.

The shot at the speaker comes as the state Senate is poised to send Gov. Blagojevich Madigan-drafted legislation that would phase out a cap on property tax assessments -- an approach Houlihan says will further inflate skyrocketing property taxes.

"The difference between myself and the speaker is that we approach the problem from a different perspective," Houlihan said. "Mike's got an extensive amount of experience as a property tax attorney representing major properties. . . . I was a community organizer."

The speaker's spokesman teed off on the assessor's findings and their implication that the speaker is trying to help clients of the Madigan & Getzendanner law firm.

"I'd say this shows a certain level of desperation," Madigan spokesman Steve Brown said.

The assessor has proposed making the so-called 7 percent assessment cap permanent, while Madigan's plan would eliminate the cap after three years. Houlihan sought to have a $60,000 exemption. Madigan's plan cuts homeowners' exemptions from $30,000 to $18,000 before a complete phase-out.

The 7 percent cap was triggered by steeply increasing assessments in 2003 and imposed a year later. For the last year, Houlihan and Mayor Daley have pressed Springfield to renew the cap.

Both Madigan and Houlihan's camps said their plans are intended to shift more of the tax burden to commercial properties and away from homeowners. But Houlihan contends commercial properties would shoulder less of the tax burden under Madigan's plan, sending residential taxes up.

"Perhaps the speaker would be just as interested if he did not do one dime of property tax business, but I think your average person on the street would roll their eyes and say this is typical Illinois politics," said Jay Stewart, executive director of the Better Government Association.

But Stewart said "it's pretty rich" that Houlihan is calling Madigan on the carpet. Last year, the BGA criticized Houlihan after finding that more than 20 percent of his campaign funds were from attorneys who did business with the assessor's office.

"It's interesting to me [that] our concern about Assessor Houlihan was dismissed out of hand by him, and at the same time, he immediately wants to cast doubt on Speaker Madigan," Stewart said.

Houlihan spokesman Lucio Guerrero disagreed, saying predecessors typically took far more in contributions from lawyers who represent clients before the assessor's office. "Attorneys hate us," Guerrero said.

**WHAT HOULIHAN SAYS THEY'D SAVE**

Here is a look at how much more some downtown high-rise owners would save in 2008 under Michael Madigan's plan than under James Houlihan's plan, according to Houlihan.

ABN/AMRO Building (right), 540 W. Madison: $312,718

AT&T Building,

227 W. Monroe: $736,529

John Hancock Center,

875 N. Michigan: $375,463

Citicorp Building,

500 W. Madison: $538,504

Prudential Building,

130 E. Randolph: $724,537

SOURCE: Cook County Assessor James Houlihan