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Final Edition

**Social moderate is conservative with cash: Treasurer: 'I see one big sham on the part of this governor'**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD-If Joan Rivers can make a career of critiquing how much cleavage celebrities are showing in their Oscar gowns, why can't state Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka?

"Too many really low necklines are just not all that pretty. A little mystery never hurt a woman," Topinka wrote in her most recent column in her hometown newspaper, the Riverside/Brookfield Landmark. "Meryl Streep ought to know better, as she is a serious actress and does not need to play the starlet game with the big plunge. Yuck!"

There you have it. Vintage blunt, irreverent Topinka.

As much as the flaming red-haired matriarch of Illinois Republicans is beloved by her supporters, Topinka's drive to get into the governor's mansion is about more than her ability to turn a pithy quote. Her campaign for the GOP gubernatorial nomination is a referendum on her three terms in a state office few Illinoisans know much about.

Her rivals in the five-way March 21 primary say it's a tenure that hasn't been pretty. They primarily point to her willingness to let some clout-heavy hotel developers off the hook for much of what they owed on state-backed construction loans.

But Topinka and her allies, including former Gov. Jim Edgar, stress that she is earnest, a skinflint with taxpayer dollars and intent on stopping the pay-to-play and hiring controversies that have dogged Gov. Blagojevich's stay in office.

"I've put in a lot of time, a lot of feeling, a lot of emotion and personal passion into making a good state and helping people, but I see one big sham on the part of this governor," Topinka said. "It bothers me. I don't like it."

Topinka, 62, oversees the state's $13 billion investment portfolio and manages a staff of about 180. She maintains an inventory of unclaimed assets turned over to the state and administers the Bright Start college savings program.

Topinka took control of the treasurer's office in 1995. She began her political career as a state representative from Chicago's west suburbs in 1980, serving two terms in the House. In 1984, she was elected to the state Senate, where she served for a decade.

"Judy has experience in government, a wide range in both the legislative and executive branches of government, which would serve her well," said Edgar, a moderate who shares many of her beliefs and is honorary chairman of her campaign. "She has the best chance of any of the Republican nominees to be successful in November."

Topinka is what many would consider a socially moderate Republican. She favors abortion rights but says minors should have a parent's consent before undergoing the procedure. On guns, she opposes allowing most Illinoisans to carry concealed weapons.

She also openly favored a change in state law that now prevents discrimination against homosexuals in the workplace and real estate market, a stance that infuriated the GOP's far right.

Jack Roeser, founder of the Family Taxpayers Network and a supporter of rival Jim Oberweis, said Topinka has drifted from once-conservative leanings and became close with Republicans that he views as rogues, such as former Gov. George Ryan, GOP power broker William Cellini and National Republican Committeeman and lobbyist Robert Kjellander.

**TOPINKA'S PICKS:**

**Tastiest thing you can cook?** Roast pork and sauerkraut. She says her chili is pretty good, too.

**TV show you hate to admit you like?** Any and all science fiction.

**Last live music performance you attended?** "The Magic Flute" by Mozart at the Lyric Opera.

**Biggest mistake?** "I make so many I can't count them all nor select from them."

**Celebrity you'd like to be stuck in an elevator with?** "If we're talking movie star, Sir Anthony Hopkins. If a politician or government type, Rudy Giuliani or John McCain. Historical figure, Elizabeth I. And then, Tina Turner."

**Book you've read cover to cover the most times?** The Snow Goose by Paul Gallico.

**Childhood nickname?** "Judith," courtesy of her grandfather, when she was bad.

**David Letterman or Jay Leno?** Leno.

**STYLE**

Look inside Judy Baar Topinka's bedroom closet, and this is one of the things you'll see: About nine out of every 10 pieces of clothing once belonged to someone else.

She's one of the state's biggest experts on secondhand stores. To prove it, she can point out the best places to buy used clothing in Quincy (Designers Again), Carbondale (Jane's Consignment Shop) and Chicago (Unique Thrift Store).

That frugality is among the most prominent traits of one of state government's most colorful characters.

She chain-smokes, drinks caffeinated beverages nonstop, freely admits her fiery red hair comes from a bottle and plays the accordion because, as her dad once told her, "you never know when that will come in handy."

If it's all a shtick, it's something voters seem to relate to because Topinka comes across like everyone's favorite poker-playing aunt.

"There's nothing phony about Judy," said House Minority Leader Tom Cross (R-Oswego), who formally endorsed her candidacy last week. "There's something kind of refreshing in someone who says, 'This is who I am. I got a cup of coffee in my hand, red hair, and I play the accordion.' "

Her only child, Army Maj. Joseph Topinka, said the redness in his mother's hair has changed with time, but he said her bluntness and frugality have not. As a child, he said his mother put particular emphasis on his grades and his manners.

"Basic courtesies to other people, that was one of the things my mother stressed most," Topinka's 38-year-old son said.

In the rough-and-tumble world of politics, the treasurer on occasion has let good manners slide, such as last week when after a candidates' debate she referred to her opponents in the GOP primary as "morons." Friday morning, she called each of her rivals to apologize.

**FUNDS**

Political committees that serve medical and banking interests typically give hefty donations to Judy Baar Topinka, and this election is no different.

The Illinois Hospital Association gave Topinka $50,000 this month and $30,000 last year. The association is Topinka's largest career donor, with about $175,000 in contributions, records show.

The Illinois National Bank political action committee has contributed $20,650 since 2005, while the International Bank of Chicago has given $11,250.

Chicago billionaire investor James Pritzker, one of Topinka's top career patrons, contributed $125,000 over the last year.

Topinka also garnered $25,000 each last year from committees supporting former Gov. Jim Edgar and U.S. Rep. Ray LaHood (R-Peoria).

Earlier this year Topinka raised $426,758, mostly in increments of $250 and $500.

Arie Zweig, president of Glenview-based R.A. Zweig, an industrial machining company, and his wife gave $50,000 last month. They have contributed nearly $70,000 to Topinka since 1995.

Topinka reported about $1.4 million in funds at the end of 2005 but raised only about $454,000 during the last half of the year, raising questions about her fund-raising capabilities in a fall campaign.

"I think I'm an effective fund-raiser. But I had limitations because so many people were in the primary, and I think there are some people who were waiting until after the primary," Topinka said.

If she wins March 21, Topinka said she expects post-primary fund-raising help from the Republican National Committee, the Republican Governors Association and President Bush himself.

**BAGGAGE**

Judy Baar Topinka's biggest political liability resides in downtown Springfield at 701 E. Adams St.

That's home to the President Abraham Lincoln Hotel and Conference Center, formerly known as the Renaissance Hotel.

Months into her first term as treasurer, Topinka signed off on a deal that would have forgiven millions of dollars in state-backed construction loans owed by a group of influential investors in the Renaissance, including GOP power broker William Cellini, and at another hotel in Downstate Collinsville.

Her rationale was simple. The state was on the hook for more than $40 million in unpaid loans because the investors were spared having to repay that money under a questionable 1991 state deal that required repayments only when the hotels turned an operating profit, which was basically never.

So, in a move Topinka said was the best that could be brokered, she proposed collecting about a quarter of the amount owed, and the investors accepted. "The facts are sustainable. We tried to get rid of a bad investment," Topinka said.

But Republican Attorney General Jim Ryan stepped in, called the transaction a bad deal for taxpayers and stopped it.

Ever since, Topinka has faced questions about her decision to help lift Cellini and his fellow hotel investors out of debt. Meanwhile, the interest owed is growing about $70,000 a month.

For Topinka, Cellini also has been a political liability because of how their paths crossed in the 1995 hotel loan deal. As a member of the state Board of Investment, Topinka's representative voted on her behalf to invest $120 million in state pension funds with Commonwealth Realty Advisors Inc., a company owned primarily by Cellini's children. Topinka said she was unaware of Commonwealth's links to him, described herself as "furious" no one told her and tried unsuccessfully to undo the 2005 vote.

Both she and Cellini -- an officer with the Sangamon County GOP organization that voted to endorse Topinka -- insist they have no relationship and rarely if ever speak.

"I, personally, have not had a conversation with Judy Baar Topinka in several years," Cellini said. "I'm not involved in the governor's race, but I wish her well."

Contributing: Tracy Schwartz