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More than Meeks or a tenant, residency becoming Rahm's biggest foe

Official challenge to Emanuel's candidacy is expected by week's end

John Kass

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There can be no finer spectacle than watching our political gladiators in the Chicago mayoral arena.

Are you not entertained?

Are ... You ... Not ... Entertained?

The three serious contenders are Rahm Emanuel, Gery Chico and state Sen. James T. Meeks.

A few others have been pushed along The Chicago Way to split the African-American vote from Meeks. Who comes to mind? Former Sen. Carol Moseley Braun, outgoing Sen. Roland "Tombstone" Burris and U.S. Rep. Danny K. Davis, D-Rev. Moon.

Emanuel is out front. Yet before Mayor Richard Daley and his brothers can begin pumping their fists for their champion, shouting "Rahmulus! Rahmulus! Rahmulus!" there's one problem.

It's that crazed tiger in the ring, skewing the odds:

Rahm's residency.

The tenacious Emanuel has the money and the institutional support. Plus, he's already hit the airwaves with those warm and fuzzy TV spots.

Nice Rahm. Neighborhood Rahm. Chicago Rahm.

And that Chicago Rahm bit is where the problem lies. Because despite the wailing and teeth-gnashing of the Rahministas among the punditry, Emanuel's residency is about to be officially challenged.

"I plan on filing the objections to his candidacy either Wednesday or Friday," longtime election attorney Burt Odelson told me on Tuesday. "This is an open-and-shut case. The law is clear. You have to live in Chicago for a

year to run for mayor."

Emanuel has lived for the past two years in Washington, as President Barack Obama's chief of staff. Rahm has vigorously made the counterargument that while he was out of town serving the president, he's long been a certified Chicago resident.

Odelson is a legal adviser to Meeks but insists the challenge isn't connected to the state senator, though Meeks clearly stands to benefit.

Either way, the first official step comes before the decidedly pro-Rahm commissioners of the Chicago Board of Elections. If Odelson's challenge loses, as expected, it continues on through the courts.

There's the legal issue, yes, but the political issue is just as problematic for Rahm.

Because each day it continues — filling the voracious news cycle with evidence and countercharges, process, testimony and spin — is another day that Emanuel isn't talking about his vision for Chicago.

And the issue threatens to grow among those constituencies that haven't yet embraced Emanuel — African-Americans and unionized city workers — especially if the perception grows that Rahm is receiving special treatment as the Daley status-quo candidate.

Last week, I was a guest on Cliff Kelley's program on WVON-AM, taking calls from his predominantly African-American audience, and I could already sense the resentment building.

But before anyone gets the wrong idea, I appreciate and respect Rahm. Sure, he's profane, but so am I when I'm not typing, and he's got a great sense of humor. And I believe he should be on the ballot.

Still, there's that nagging issue. It's called the law.

The state residency law has cost other deserving candidates, including former Chicago Schools Chief Paul Vallas. He wanted to run for governor in 2006 and challenge soon-to-be-indicted incumbent Rod Blagojevich. Vallas was denied because he didn't live in Illinois at the time but rather in Pennsylvania.

Since my columns on Odelson's arguments ran last week, Emanuel's media cheerleaders shrieked and called it a red herring, Daley came out of the shadow to publicly defend him, and Rahm made his case.

"I was born in the city of Chicago," Emanuel said last week. "I was a congressman from the city of Chicago. I raised my kids here in the city of Chicago.

"I own a home here in the city of Chicago — which I look forward to moving into soon. ... I pay property taxes here in the city of Chicago. I vote in the city of Chicago. That's what's important. And that's the bottom line," he said.

But one thing he forgot to mention is that he did not file his homeowner's property tax exemption here in the city of Chicago.

In order to receive the homeowner's break, Emanuel would have had to affirm, under penalty of law, that the home he owns on the 4200 block of North Hermitage Avenue was his primary residence.

According to county records, Emanuel filed his homeowner's exemption for the 2008 tax year. But he didn't sign that form for the 2009 year. Why? Because he was living in Washington and he'd already rented his home out to Chicago developer Rob Halpin, who just filed to run for mayor himself.

I brought the residency issue up in a conversation Tuesday with Vallas. He was in Chicago to endorse Chico, his old colleague from their school board days.

Vallas' presence here, applauding Chico as the most qualified to be mayor, serves two functions. It helps Chico, and it surely must frost the Daley boys.

"Residency is a tough issue," Vallas told me. "They used it against me. How Rahm deals with it is his business. But the law was used to stop me against Blagojevich. Ask police and firefighters if residency isn't an issue. You'd better believe it's an issue."

While Chico and Emanuel have been out campaigning, Meeks has kept a lower profile. He didn't even file his own nominating petitions this week, opting to send Odelson in his stead.

Emanuel has been in the lead, but every candidate has weaknesses. Chico and Meeks must strike hard and quickly with just 90 days before the Feb. 22 election.

But so far, they haven't.

They must be waiting for that tiger in the arena to take care of Rahmulus for them.

Rahm is definitely not entertained.