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Post-Daley circus gets started early

Easier to count those who aren't running than those who are

By Rick Pearson, Hal Dardick, Tribune reporters

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The post-Daley era in Chicago politics began Wednesday with all of the promise of baseball's Opening Day — no winners, no losers and everyone proclaiming they have a shot at the crown.

With Mayor Richard Daley saying he would not endorse a successor for the Feb. 22 city election, various political factions engaged in private meetings and a flurry of phone calls aimed at separating the contenders from the pretenders.

"There will be a lot of candidates," Daley said after his first City Council meeting since announcing he would not seek a seventh term. "Look at the City Council. All 50 are candidates right now. They all want to be candidates for mayor and why not? This the best job in America, right here."

In the anteroom behind the City Council chambers, the scene was controlled chaos as more than a dozen aldermen — white, black and Latino — happily stepped out of the meeting to give interviews to anyone who wanted to listen about how they could be the city's next mayor.

But the prospective candidates — following the old political adage that it's "better to be looked over than overlooked" — weren't limited to City Hall.

In Washington, White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel was touted by another Chicagoan, President Barack Obama's political guru David Axelrod, as having the skills and personality to be a big-city mayor.

Amid all the early jockeying, bluffing and bullying, veteran Ald. Richard Mell, 33rd, outlined the nuts and bolts reality of mounting a mayoral campaign with only weeks before the Nov. 22 deadline for submitting petitions.

"Someone's got to have some serious money. This isn't something you just decide," Mell said. "It takes a full-scale ward-by-ward operation to identify your votes and get them out to vote."

Mell also talked about the qualities to look for in a winning candidate — someone who will be a "unifier" and "can't be looked at as looking at one segment of the city."

Still, many politicians were beginning their assessment by gauging the mood of their political base.

"I don't know if it's as important that it's an African-American candidate as it is about a candidate that is going to be fair to the African-American community," said Ald. Walter Burnett, 27th, head of the council's black caucus, which met in private at the Hotel Allegro across from City Hall.

"For anyone to run for mayor of the city of Chicago there has to be a groundswell of people in the city to support them ... Everyone has an opportunity."

At City Hall, amid the swarm of politicians and reporters, U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush, a South Side Democrat, said it was "critical" to try to find an African-American contender who would work for the black community's interests. But the council's black caucus agreed only to try to come up with a list of topics, such as improving education, that prospective candidates should address.

Latino council members met for lunch and agreed to meet again within the next few weeks, giving potential candidates time to develop a presentation to make to them.

"If there's a Hispanic that runs, he or she will probably get the majority of the Hispanic vote," said Ald. Danny Solis, 25th.

"I think more than likely it probably, if you look at the numbers, it won't be a Hispanic in the runoff," Solis said. "But then I think we can play a very important role" in backing one of the remaining candidates.

But such sentiments didn't deter one of the city's most prominent Latino politicians from declaring that he plans to run. City Clerk Miguel del Valle told the Tribune he planned to make a formal announcement "down the road."

Mell and many others expect the field for the February city election will be too fragmented for any candidate to reach the winning margin of 50 percent plus one vote. If there is no outright winner, the top two vote-getters proceed to an April 5 runoff election.

One prominent Northwest Side committeeman, who asked not to be identified because of the early stage of the campaigns, said the measure of those candidates who are real and those who are seeking an ego boost can be measured in two numbers: 25,000 and \$7 million.

Though 12,500 signatures are needed for the February primary, politicians routinely get double the number to ensure they make the ballot. As for \$7 million, the committeeman said, about \$4 million would be needed to ensure a first or second place finish on Feb. 22, followed by a campaign of about \$3 million for the April runoff.

"I'm getting a lot of calls about having lunch," said the committeeman. "I've told them to call me back when they get the signatures and then we can talk about fundraising."

Ald. Patrick Levar, 45th, who is not running for mayor, said this power vacuum reminds him of when Mayor Harold Washington died and Eugene Sawyer was picked to replace him.

"There's a lot of people who are going to be jockeying for position, but I've learned over the years to sit and listen and see who can put the different coalitions together," said Levar, who is also the Northwest Side ward's Democratic committeeman. "Whoever can raise the amount of money and put the coalition together is the person who is going to win."

While many politicians were starting those discussions, some key Democratic committeemen said they hadn't heard from Emanuel, one of the most prominent potential candidates.

Emanuel, a former top political aide to Daley and Northwest Side congressman, has previously said he'd like to

be mayor but has avoided the spotlight since Daley's announcement.

Robert Gibbs, the White House press secretary, told reporters aboard Air Force One that he expected Emanuel to "take some time to think about what he wants to do with his future."

But Axelrod, who previously served as Daley's political adviser, told ABC News that if Emanuel decided to leave the White House for a mayoral bid, "the president will support that decision."

Saying mayors are "larger than life personalities," Axelrod said Emanuel "has that combination of skills and that personality and mindset to be a success if he chooses to go that route."