

Chicago Sun-Times Endorsement

COMMENTARY :Alvarez is our pick for state's attorney

September 29, 2008

The people of Cook County need a state's attorney who is ready to run the office now, not someone ready to learn on the job.

This is the crucial difference between the two candidates running for the job, career prosecutor Anita Alvarez and Cook County Commissioner Tony Peraica.

Alvarez has been a prosecutor in the Cook County state's attorney's office for 22 years. After graduating from Chicago-Kent College of Law, she worked her way up from the bottom rungs of the prosecutor's office -- a rare Hispanic woman in an old boy's club -- to the office's No. 3 position.

Alvarez rose on merit. She is a skilled prosecutor with a long string of convictions, having put behind bars everybody from rogue cops to the infamous thug who so brutally assaulted "Girl X." She has the skills and credibility to lead the county's foot soldiers in the war on crime because she herself has worked years in the trenches.

We've heard the arguments against Alvarez: She's the status quo. She's the Machine candidate. She's not the person to shake up the office.

Those views equate experience with stagnation. Alvarez, though, comes with fresh ideas to improve the office, including adding prosecution units for mortgage fraud and identity theft. And while Alvarez is reserved and measured in demeanor, she strikes us as no one's pushover.

Peraica, too, is no wilting daffodil. In his campaign, he has vowed to fight corruption, calling it another tax on strapped Cook County residents, and we couldn't agree with him more. The problem of official corruption in Cook County has been a recurring theme of ours. Peraica has built his career on battling unnecessary taxation and wasteful spending. He has been an effective pit bull on the county board, sinking his teeth into the excesses of the administration of President Todd Stroger.

And it is there -- as a loud watchdog on the county board -- that we think Peraica's talents are best suited.

Fighting public corruption is just one responsibility -- and hardly the first responsibility -- of the state's attorney's office, as Alvarez knows from long experience. The office's first job, day in and day out, is to prosecute the thousands of often horrific crimes that can upend civilized life -- the murders and rapes, the beatings and burglaries, the holdups and thefts and drug deals.

It is an office of enormous power. Simply by starting an investigation, a prosecutor can savage a person's life. We raise this issue because Peraica, for all his strengths, has revealed a habit of attacking first and mastering the details later, a troubling trait for someone who wants to be the county's top criminal prosecutor.

In one instance, for example, Peraica turned a fair shot into a cheap shot. He appropriately questioned whether Alvarez was wise to pick Robert Clifford, a powerhouse personal injury lawyer who has sued the county in the past, to be her campaign finance chairman. Alvarez's response is that if a conflict of interest were to arise, she would deal with it openly.

But Peraica went on to suggest that Alvarez somehow violated legal ethics and the law by turning over to Clifford various criminal court files in the case of Girl X, the 9-year-old girl who was raped and beaten in 1997. Clifford was representing Girl X in a civil suit. In truth, Alvarez did not personally turn over any files to Clifford. Rather, he obtained the files through the routine, legal and entirely appropriate discovery process.

Peraica is a smart lawyer. He knows better.

Alvarez is much more experienced in the world of criminal courts than Peraica. Better yet, she has demonstrated superior judgment.

The Chicago Sun-Times endorses Anita Alvarez for Cook County state's attorney.