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## Green for governor

### Rich Whitney's long shot campaign

BY PATRICK YEAGLE



stimulate the economy, Whitney asserts. But his campaign isn't just about better transportation. Whitney is one of 10 candidates currently vying for the state's top executive position, and his ideas would mark a major shift in Illinois' tax system, finances, energy policy, criminal law and other areas of public policy.

Richard J. Whitney is a rare breed in Illinois – pro-gun but anti-war, outspoken yet diplomatic, a former socialist turned Illinois Green Party founder. He has detailed and nuanced views on everything from abortion to workers' rights, and the issue essays on his campaign website impart an air of enlightenment and pragmatism. In many ways, Whitney is the thinking man's candidate, the "philosopher king" from Plato's Republic.

"Good ideas don't always resolve themselves in sound bites," he says.



organize our government – has much more to do with the quality of our lives than what we do just by our individual efforts," he says. "Ever since then, I've tried to find the answers. I was all over the place – liberal one year, Republican the next. My ideas kept evolving."

While attending college at Michigan State University from 1973 to 1977, Whitney became disillusioned with mainstream political discourse, and he began working as an activist with the Socialist Labor Party after graduating. He grew disillusioned with the socialist movement as well, he says, and he left the party to attend law school during the mid '90s. There he first began looking at the Green Party.

"What impressed me about the Green Party is that it takes a more comprehensive approach to social problems than you would find with socialist groups," Whitney says, adding that the Green Party didn't seem to have the attitude of, "If you do A, B and C, we'll live in a utopia." Instead, he says the Green Party is more apt to evaluate ideas and "learn by doing" than other political parties with which he had been involved.

This isn't Whitney's first rodeo. He ran as a Green candidate for governor in 2006 against Democrat Rod Blagojevich and Republican Judy Baar Topinka, receiving 361,336 votes — 10.4 percent of the statewide total. Although he didn't even come close to winning, he did help his party gain "established" status, by getting more than the required 5 percent of votes in a race for statewide office. That means Green Party candidates only have to obtain 5,000 signatures to get on the ballot, instead of the 25,000 required of non-established party

If you knew where to look you might have seen him – bearded, bespectacled and biking through Springfield. Looking more like a college professor than a politician, the Green Party candidate for governor, Rich Whitney, spent May 20 through 28 riding his bike and various trains on a 650-mile tour across the state to promote sustainable transportation – getting around while minimizing environmental impact.

"I believe that moving in the direction of sustainable transportation is an important component of moving to a new energy future," Whitney says. "Americans have a love affair with the automobile; people talk about it being part of our culture. I understand that, and in pushing for alternatives, it's not my expectation to be lecturing people about their lifestyles. I'm not saying everybody should stop using cars. That's not realistic, but part of the policy of sustainable transportation is to make it easier to do that. It really is a pocket book issue."

Behind the talk about breaking free from oil addiction and making transportation more affordable for the working class was an unspoken message about altering some of the fundamentals of Illinois government and politics. Creating more green transportation infrastructure would save money, create jobs and

Whitney focuses much of his political platform on good government, equality and social justice – along with fixing the state's dire financial problems – and he has already put considerable effort into planning his agenda, should he be elected. But what motivates a 55-year-old civil rights lawyer from Carbondale to run for governor of one of the most troubled states in the nation?

"We need a government that's going to serve the interests of the people," Whitney says. "We the people have been shut out; we're no longer part of the process under the so-called 'two-party system.' The banks and the corporations, through the power of big money and big influence, basically dominate the Democratic and Republican parties, so that's whose interests they serve. Whoever pays the piper gets to call the tunes."

Whitney first became interested in politics while attending high school in Randolph, N.J., during the early 1970s, where he became curious about why issues like unemployment, poverty and pollution seemed like such "unsolvable problems."

"I've always had a feeling that what we do as a society – how we

candidates. Prior to his first run for governor, Whitney ran for state representative for district 115 in southern Illinois as a Green Party candidate in 2004, losing to Republican Mike Bost.

Now, Whitney says, Illinoisans are frustrated enough with the two main parties to seek answers elsewhere.

"People who pay attention are very clearly fed up," he says.

Among Whitney's priorities is a proposal to switch Illinois' flat rate income tax to a graduated income tax in which individuals with higher incomes pay a larger percentage. That move would require a constitutional amendment. While he concedes the idea is largely unpopular in conservative circles, Whitney believes the current system is fundamentally unfair because the poor must pay a larger proportion of their total income in taxes. The wealthy can write off much of their tax burden, he says.

Whitney has also called for an income tax increase, as was proposed this legislative session by Gov. Pat Quinn. The measure was tabled, some analysts say, because the legislature can't stomach raising taxes before an election. Whitney pairs his tax proposals with plans for an audit of the state budget to identify and cut wasteful programs, practices and positions – an idea borrowed from former Republican gubernatorial candidate Adam Andrzejewski. Whitney hopes to cut \$2 billion from the budget by cutting waste and ending pork-barrel spending.

"The idea that government is a kind of fatted calf, and that the main goal of each legislator is to get the biggest slice for his or her district, regardless of the effect on the rest of the state, is a sickness, destructive of the public good," Whitney says in his 21-page position paper on how to fix the state's economy and finances.

Among his other policy prescriptions are legalizing and taxing marijuana, raising the minimum wage to a "living wage," making college free for qualified residents and expanding public sector employment with more, higher-paying social service jobs.

Whitney has plans for a state-run bank – similar to one created by North Dakota – which would collect all state revenues to invest both surplus funds and private deposits in projects that would benefit the state. He also hopes to promote green energy by implementing a "fee and dividend" system, which would collect fees from greenhouse gas producers and nuclear power companies. Part of the proceeds would be used to pay the state's bills, while the rest would be redistributed to among Illinois residents, with low-income residents receiving the largest shares.



To address what some experts believe is the root cause of the national economic downturn, Whitney would tax speculative trading, the highly-risky public trading of derivatives and other complex financial devices.

"That type of trading has no redeeming social value; it's pure gambling," he says. "That's what caused the real estate bubble to collapse. It's purely predatory and destructive activity. I propose we tax it so a fraction of that profit can provide benefit to the public."

Whitney says he is particularly upset about the plight of people with disabilities, who have seen large cuts in social services that help them live productive and full lives, as well as discrimination against the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender community. Whitney summarizes his position on LGBT issues by saying he supports extending the same rights, privileges and protections to everyone, adding that he feels the nation needs to mature in its attitude toward sexual orientation.

"Tolerance is good – better than not – but we need to think more in terms of really embracing diversity," Whitney says. "Tolerance

implies that people who have a different sexual orientation are the 'other,' but we'll tolerate them. No, these are our brothers and sisters. Human nature is diverse, and we need to move beyond tolerance. It's not something government can do, but policy can motivate it."

Despite his novel ideas, a guaranteed spot on the ballot and popular political sentiment clamoring for change, Whitney faces a couple of challenges that could stop his campaign dead in its tracks. His biggest problem, he admits, is fundraising – largely because Green Party candidates take no campaign money from corporations and political action committees. Instead, Whitney is relying solely on individual donations.

Jennifer Janasie, Whitney's campaign manager, says Whitney has raised about \$29,000 dollars since December, but points out the campaign is significantly ahead of the \$16,866 Whitney reported for the same time period last time he ran for governor.

"We have a lot more people sending in donations this time," Janasie says. "The numbers in no way suggest we can't be competitive."

Dr. Kent Redfield, a political science researcher and professor emeritus at the University of Illinois-Springfield, says he doesn't expect any statewide candidate in Illinois to make much headway without spending at least \$10 million. Redfield, who has studied Illinois politics since 1979, says third-party candidates will always have trouble winning in Illinois.

"The system is obviously structured to favor established parties in a two-party system," Redfield says. "You've got to be a policy alternative, and you must get candidates who can be attractive – like Ralph Nader, Jesse Ventura or Ross Perot. But they still need a combination of organizational strength, leadership, presence and visibility. Even then, historically, successful third parties have tended to be co-opted or absorbed by the other parties.

"You really have to get some huge realignment of voters, and one established party has to become really marginalized," Redfield continues. "Third-party candidates usually pick up the protest vote – voters who can't bring themselves to vote for either of the main party candidates."

Another challenge facing Whitney is the crowded ballot, says Rich Miller, a journalist with 20 years of experience covering Illinois politics whose column appears weekly in Illinois Times. In a normal race, a third-party candidate can act as a magnet for protest votes against the two main parties. But in this race, Miller says, the protest vote may be split between the seven other third-party and independent gubernatorial candidates currently slated to appear on the ballot. While objections to those candidates' signature petitions may knock some of them off the ballot, the protest vote may still be diluted enough to keep any alternative candidate from receiving a substantial number of votes.



Miller says Whitney's campaign currently isn't doing an effective job of getting his message to voters.

"He's not even running a student council campaign," Miller says. "If I'm Whitney, I'm going to AFSCME, the teachers' unions and

not do it [support Whitney] anyway, but at least it's something."

everybody else, saying 'I'm your guy. Take a chance.' They might

Whitney says he has approached the unions about supporting his campaign, receiving good feedback from educators and individual union members, but he says he was disappointed when the Illinois Education Association chose to recommend Quinn instead.

"I think many of the rank and file members (of IEA) will still support me," Whitney says. "They understand that was a bad decision, and I know there was a lot of dissent over that. I'm hoping we have better luck with IFT [Illinois Federation of Teachers], and we're reaching out to AFSCME as well. Part of the difficulty there is that right now, Pat Quinn is their boss, and secondly, labor has historically had ties with the Democratic Party, and they want to back somebody they think has a reasonable chance of winning."

Miller says that while some of Whitney's ideas may be too far-out for Illinois, that doesn't rule him out. What rules Whitney out, Miller says, is voters' "fear of the unknown," which manifests itself in reflexive voters who vote along party lines because that's what they've always done.

"It's sad to say, but too many of the people in our society are not really civically-engaged," Whitney says. "It's not as bad as Jay Leno with his 'Jay Walking,' but there are people who don't even know who the current governor is, people who just barely pay attention."

Still, Whitney is confident that his campaign will be effective at reaching voters who feel disaffected, marginalized and frustrated, particularly once he begins a series of TV, radio and billboard advertisements closer to the Nov. 2 general election.

"Given our fund situation, we've had to adopt a strategy of working from the end of October backwards, rather than blowing money now, when people aren't paying attention," he says.

Whitney learned a couple of lessons from his first run for governor, he says. Primarily, he learned that he needed to get better at fundraising.

"It's a hard lesson to learn, but I have learned that the best person to do fundraising is me," he says. "People respond to personal requests. I'm not comfortable with it, but it's a necessary evil in political campaigns."

Whitney's extensive political platform is the byproduct of another lesson he learned the first time around: a successful candidate needs a well-developed campaign strategy.

"We've done a lot more advance planning – what we expect to do, what the campaign should look like," he says. "With both it hasn't been 100 percent success, because we can't anticipate everything that will happen, but by and large, we're much more ahead of the game this time in terms of having a campaign strategy and organization that is functional."

He also stresses that he is not running just to prove a point – he is in it to win. Asked how he intends to do that, Whitney says he will continue to align himself with groups that share his goals, including good government organizations, anti-war activists, health care advocates and organized labor, among others.

"I want to build a coalition that represents the people," Whitney says. "I'll use that coalition to put pressure on legislators to move independently away from the corporate base. If I win, I'll be claiming a mandate from the people."

For more information on Whitney's campaign, visit [www.whitneyforgov.org](http://www.whitneyforgov.org).

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