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Race for lieutenant gov takes wacky, pricey turn takes

W. Side lawmakers revive old dispute amid record spending

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BY **STEVE CONTORNO** Staff Reporter

SPRINGFIELD -- Few dispute that Illinois' lieutenant governor is a backwater political office, so can it be any surprise that two of the dozen candidates vying for the vacant post have spent time bickering over an alleged eviction more than three decades ago?

State Sen. Rickey Hendon once rented an apartment from state Rep. Art Turner, and neither lieutenant governor candidate disputes that. But the two West Side Democrats don't agree on why Hendon left.

"He has the unique distinction of being the second person I've ever evicted," Turner said.

"It's just simply not true," Hendon said. "I lived in one of Art's buildings [in North Lawndale]. I moved from there to an apartment on Lake Shore Drive. Clearly, I can afford rent.

"I didn't even stay there two months -- rats and roaches, that kind of thing."

The decades-old dispute adds a bizarre element to a lieutenant governor race that is already strange. The open office has attracted six Democrats and six Republicans and has seen a record amount of money raised and spent.

This for a position that was vacated by Republican Dave O'Neal in 1981 because he found the job too boring.

"It's a very unusual situation," said Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois-Springfield, who confirmed the race is the most expensive in the office's history. "If we hadn't had the impeachment [of Rod Blagojevich], it would be a lower profile sort of thing."

The ousting of Blagojevich and ascension of Gov. Quinn from the lieutenant governor's office left the job up for grabs and gave a blueprint for those with higher political aspirations. The result has been a crowded field that is exceeding campaign fund-raising norms.

Since 1994, the average amount raised by a candidate in a lieutenant governor primary election was about \$200,000, state campaign records show.

During the second half of 2009 alone, the average amount raised among the dozen candidates stood at more than \$250,000. Factor in the \$2.2 million in contributions reported since Jan. 1, and the average raised climbs closer to \$440,000.

The poster children for unusually high spending are the three primarily self-funded candidates: Democrat Scott Lee Cohen, a Chicago pawn shop owner and businessman, and Republicans Jason Plummer, a lumber company executive, and Don Tracy, a Springfield attorney.

Cohen, who has lent \$2 million of his own money to his campaign, said it has been costly trying to build name recognition.

"It's very hard when you're not part of that machine to get your message out without spending money," Cohen said.

Independently wealthy outsiders aren't the only ones raising eyebrows. Sen. Matt Murphy (R-Palatine) took in \$555,483 in the latest reporting period, largely thanks to his unofficial running mate, Republican candidate

