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## Aurora mayor's race takes a negative turn



Aurora mayoral candidates Rick Guzman and Richard Irvin. (Jon Langham / The Beacon-News)

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**By Steve Lord**

The mayoral race in Aurora that has been lauded for its positivity took a negative turn this week.

Campaign mailings with negative messages about both candidates Rick Guzman and Richard Irvin came to Aurora households in the past several days, prompting both candidates to cry foul about their opponent.

One of the mailings even prompted Aurora Mayor Robert O'Connor to respond to what he called "misleading information" about the city during this week's City Council meeting.

That mailing was a piece against Guzman that asserted that Aurora is "nearly \$700 million in debt," and that the city's home values are plummeting, and that property taxes "are some of the highest in the nation."

O'Connor said he would stay away from the political claims in the piece, but responded that the city is actually responsible for \$170 million of debt. He said the city does carry about \$470 million in debt in its public pension funds, but "that is an entirely different animal" because a lot of that is "directed by the state."

"The city is directly responsible for \$170 million in debt," he said.

He also said property values in Aurora have been increasing, as much as 33 percent in some places, and that there are 57 communities in the Chicago area that have higher effective tax rates than Aurora. He added that there are 233 communities statewide that have a higher tax rate than the highest rate in Aurora. The city has a number of different tax rates, depending on the part of town.

"I wanted to make this clear," he said. "This is misleading information. It's a disservice to this council, to the city of Aurora and to the citizens of Aurora."

Guzman said the political information in the piece is not just misleading, but outright false. The piece cites an online newspaper as saying non-profits Guzman is connected to made late tax payments. It also connected Guzman with former Gov. Rod Blagojevich, in whose office he worked, but does not mention that he also worked under Gov. George Ryan.

Guzman said in a press release that the organization he founded, Emmanuel House, is not required to make tax payments at all on the properties it owns because it is a registered not-for-profit organization. But added "the organization's board has chosen to pay taxes in order to show its support of the Aurora community."

Emmanuel House buys rental properties and continues to rent them to families, but as much as half of the rent payments they make goes into an account for the family that they eventually can use to buy the property. In that way, the organization creates new homeowners and puts the properties back into the hands of homeowners, expanding the tax base, Guzman said.

"We believe our mission is to stabilize neighborhoods, and we don't want to take money away from the school districts, or any other taxing bodies," he said.

He said that at times, because of cash flow, the organization has made payments past the original due date, but within guidelines provided on the bill for when payment can be made.

Guzman went on to blame the Irvin campaign "and those connected to it - for consistently putting out untrue and misleading fake news to sway the election."

He said there have been rumors put out on social media and on the radio repeating false stories with no proof.

Irvin responded, when asked if he or his campaign had anything to do with the mailing this week: "absolutely not – exclamation point." He pointed out that the flyer attacks the record of Aurora, which he had a part in making.

"The mailing is disparaging the very city I'm running to become mayor of," he said. "I have no interest in these supposed watchdog tax groups that are intruding in our election. They are not invited."

At this week's council meeting, Irvin sat next to O'Connor when the mayor made his remarks, and Irvin said later he agreed with everything the mayor said.

The mailing cites a political action committee based in Evergreen Park called the Committee for Respected Leadership. The PAC is registered with the state although it has not filed its financial information for the first quarter of 2017. Calls to the Evergreen Park resident listed as the president of the organization went unanswered Wednesday.

Irvin criticized Guzman for a mailing he sent to households Wednesday that claims Irvin's law firm "justifies domestic violence by blaming victims." The mailing, which is clearly marked as being from Guzman's campaign, shows a screen shot from Irvin's law firm's website that advises people on how to defend themselves if they have been charged with domestic battery. Among other things, the advice tells people, "Often, the victim of domestic battery cases was actually the aggressor in that situation."

Irvin said Wednesday afternoon he did not write the wording on the website and was not familiar with it, and that he has a webmaster "who is charged with driving people to the website." But he added the Guzman mailing "misconstrued" some of the statements on the website.

Guzman said the mailing shows a screenshot of the website, simply giving people a chance to decide for themselves what they think of it.

"People's records are fair game," Guzman said. "What we have is a problem with outright lies."

Still, Irvin said that while Guzman was reacting with indignation over the hit piece that went out earlier in the week, he had planned his negative mailing all along.

"This shows clearly he had planned on going negative the whole time," Irvin said.