

MARK BROWN



e-mail:
markbrown@
suntimes.com

Tillman stares down union critics: 'Just tell them to come on with it'

Are you ready to rumble?
Dorothy Tillman is.
Dorothy Tillman always is ready to rumble.

"Just tell them to come on with it," Tillman told me the other day after my column about the Service Employees International Union tentatively targeting her and other aldermen for defeat in the February aldermanic elections. "Let them come on."

Tillman's tone was actually less combative than the words might appear. It sounded more like a taunt than a threat.

She was almost laughing.

Tillman has represented the 3rd Ward on the City Council since Mayor Harold Washington appointed her in 1984. In the more than two decades since, she has faced her share of re-election fights and doesn't seem overly concerned about one more.

If organized labor is going to come after her this time for her opposition to the Big Box ordinance, she figures it just gives her that much more ammunition in her self-styled role as a voice of black empowerment.

"They don't put African Americans in the construction unions," Tillman said, arguing that it's her outspoken criticism on that subject that has drawn the unions' ire, not her position on the Big Box retailers. "You've got to open up the unions to more blacks."

"It's a new wave of racism. That's what it is," Tillman continued. "They didn't say they was going after the mayor."

I'll bet there weren't many readers surprised to see that Tillman raised race as an issue.

'Lightning rod for criticism'

Whether it's a battle over minority contract set-asides, slavery reparations or an offensive painting of a deceased mayor, Tillman has long put herself in the middle of this most sensitive of subjects, and she's not afraid of injecting an accusation of racism to make her point.

I'm not going to characterize that as "playing the race card" because that would suggest that it's just some type of tactic in a game for her, which would diminish the point that this is also what she really believes. I may find it tiresome at times, but I'm white, last time I looked.

I don't doubt her sincerity, for instance, when she accuses SEIU of failing to protect the janitorial jobs of its members when the Daley administration privatized their work at the city airports, jobs that were mostly held by African Americans.

This approach has made her the proverbial "lightning rod for criticism." Just seeing her name in print seems to send some white males into a tizzy, judging by my past e-mails when she's

prominently in the news.

"In America, when you fight for black folks, something is wrong," Tillman said of the animosity she engenders.

But it has also helped Tillman keep just enough defenders in her corner to stay one step ahead of her political opponents.

At least two significant 3rd Ward challengers are on the horizon this time. Community activist and former city planner Pat Dowell, who fell about 1,300 votes short four years ago, is trying again.

Businessman Mell Monroe also is putting together a serious campaign. Both have criticized Tillman for not taking care of the basic needs of the ward.

Elsewhere, on Page 11 of today's paper, is a story about Tillman defending herself against criticism that she spent more than \$200,000 in city funds to erect four statues of blues musicians, using a fifth of the ward's limited dollar allotment intended for infrastructure improvements. It's hard to say how that will play with 3rd Ward voters.

Tillman's mood took on a bit more of an edge when I told her what the union's researcher had written about her in his thumbnail profile of the ward.

After citing her "reputation as a fiery speaker, particularly on issues affecting African Americans," the report went on to say that Tillman "has also experienced personal difficulties. Tillman's wages were garnished twice to pay delinquent bills, and she was once sued by the city for an unpaid water bill."

'I just think it's petty'

Tillman seemed surprised that the union would be digging into her "personal difficulties." She said the reference to wage garnishments probably involves past problems with student loans for her children.

"I don't apologize for sending my children to college," she said. "I was paying them, and I guess I wasn't paying them fast enough. That's silly, you know. The college is all paid for. Remember, I sent five of them to school."

I don't have the details.

The problems with the water bill surfaced in 1998 when Tillman's service was shut off for nonpayment. City officials at the time said they'd made a mistake in processing her paperwork on a negotiated payment plan.

"They sure are stretching," Tillman said. "I just think it's petty."

Now she's really ready to rumble.

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Just seeing Dorothy Tillman's name in print seems to send some white males into a tizzy.