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Focus / news and issues

Getting a head start on 1975

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Political editor

IT WAS MID-AFTERNOON and the neon along Milwaukee Avenue was in a losing contest with the sunshine. "Fifielski's," proclaimed one sign, "Your Supermarket of Service."

There is was, the storefront headquarters of the Hon. Edwin P. Fifielski, alderman of the 45th ward and stalwart [tho indicted] defender of the Machine. From that one modest office a citizen can invest in real estate, buy some insurance [fire, casualty and life], hire a lawyer, or complain to his alderman, all by talking to the same man.

"Slow down," Bill Singer ordered his driver. "Look at that sign, just look at it. 'Your Supermarket of Service.' Isn't that wild? This town is really something."

Then he laughed, this alderman, of the 43d ward and adversary of the Machine. He's 32 years old and when he laughs he seems even younger. But the fact that he can laugh at Fifielski's sign—rather than bursting out in indignation against the Chicago system of politics-for-profit—reflects on Singer's maturity as a reformer.

Some things can be cured. Other things, at least for now, must be endured.

SINCE 1969 SINGER has sat in the city council, pleading for recognition, representing the white liberals who populate his North Side ward, criticizing the Daley administration for assorted transgressions, and generally earning a reputation as one who doesn't speak out until he knows about that which he speaks.

Last month Singer announced that he is doing something even some of his friends think is foolish: he's running for mayor. This means, of course, that he'll probably face Richard J. Daley himself. Because even tho he's had the job for nearly 19 years, and even tho he's 71 years old, and even tho his organization is cracking, this mayor is not a quitter. Those buttons sprouting around City Hall—"Keep Chicago Alive, Daley in '75"—tell the story.

The conventional political wisdom holds that Singer has some chance if Daley decides not to run because the field would be so large that anybody would have a chance. But the same wisdom holds that if Daley does run Singer has no chance at all.

After all, the mayor has his Machine, strung together by patronage and operating in varying degrees of performance in all 50 wards. A lot of precinct captains have been sitting on their haunches the last few elections, but they won't be in the mayor's race. Their job is at stake.

Singer, on the other hand, has no organization outside the well-oiled apparatus along the lakefront, which has put him in the city council twice and elected a few other antimachine aldermen and state legislators in the area.

THERE'S A LOT OF Chicago west of Halsted. There are the vast black ghettos on the south and west sides, the

endless ethnic neighborhoods southwest, the industrial centers farther south; and there's that vast composite of urbanity known as the Northwest Side.

The Northwest Side has always supported Daley, tho not as totally or as automatically as the black river wards or the payrollers of the 11th ward. It is territory Singer must win over if he is to get anywhere, and it is where he's spending a lot of time these days.

This particular day started at the Farmers' Market at Elston and Hamlin where housewives were grumbling over the price of ground chuck and genial Knights of Columbus were peddling their Tootsie Rolls. "Hi, I'm Bill Singer, and I'm running for mayor." That's the line, and the responses fly in the face of that Conventional Wisdom.

"I'm tired of Daley shouting everybody down in the Council; he reminds me of Krushchev pounding his shoe on the table," said one stern lady caught squeezing a cantaloupe.

"I'm for you," said another woman, more restrained. "Daley's an old man. He's ready to retire."

THE NEXT stop was the corner of Milwaukee Avenue and West Irving Park Road, in front of the big Sears store where three ethnic wards—the 35th the 39th and the 45th—come together to provide a fascinating slice of Chicago.

Again, the people are surprisingly friendly to Singer and outspoken in their criticism of the mayor.

A guy from the electrical workers came up and asked him to speak at their next meeting. A carload of nuns driving by stopped to honk. A factory worker asked for a



CHICAGO TODAY photos by Jim Mescall

Getting out and meeting citizens is Alderman Bill Singer's campaign plan, like he does here at the Logan Square CTA train station, 2700 N. Milwaukee Av., as he prepares to move in on the 1975 mayoral race.

Singer button and then asked for one more for the wife. "That Daley's an s.o.b.," he explained. "All he does is raise taxes, raise the water rates, raise everything."

Farther north, the stream of commuters had started at the massive Jefferson Park terminal. For over an hour Singer stood there, shaking hundreds of hands, listening to hundreds of comments from people urging everything from the impeachment of Nixon to the scrapping of a proposed 9,000-car park-and-ride facility in the neighborhood.

One man refused to shake the alderman's hand saying, "I remember '72," a reference to Singer's ouster of the elected Daley delegation at last year's Democratic convention.

A woman shook his hand, said she had seen him on television, that she liked him and that she thought he was "way too young to be running for mayor."

BUT MOST OF THE COMMENTS—in fact, nearly all the comments—were encouraging to Singer. "At least someone is fighting for us in the city council," said one man in his early twenties.

Even two men claiming to be city employees wished Singer well, tho careful not to go too far even in their anonymity. The remarks showed a strong anti-Daley sentiment.

The word is getting around. One northwest side committeeman, who is close to Daley, said no one in the machine with any sense is taking Singer for granted.

"I've heard so many reports about how well Singer is received in my ward that it makes me sick," said the committeeman "Let's face it, the guy is sharp and he's offering something different. With Watergate and all, people are down on politicians, particularly incumbents. And the mayor's not getting any younger."

SINGER'S PLATFORM is predictable. He promises to do something about the schools, about crime, about corruption, about the middle-class drift to the suburbs.

So far, he is a little short on specifics. For instance, the Catholic schools, he says, are in trouble because the courts keep knocking out any parochial plans passed by the legislature. But he doesn't offer any new proposals of his own.

There are 15 months to go until the Democratic primary for mayor in March of 1975. Singer has started early because he says he needs time to meet the people, a necessity for a candidate who is not likely to have the money for an expensive media campaign.

To even guess at his chances at this stage is impossible, not knowing what the mayor will do, not knowing whether Gov. Walker will back Singer or whether the recent Walker-Daley deal contained some still secret clauses, not knowing whether United States Attorney Jim Thompson will run on the Republican ticket.

If pressed to the wall, the best guess would be that Singer will be clobbered, no matter how many voters are vocalizing against Daley. That would have also been the best guess regarding Dan Walker.