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By Alex Nitkin - April 2, 2020

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Cook County Board **President Toni Preckwinkle** threw cold water Wednesday on property owners' hopes that their second-installment tax bills may be delayed while they reel from the economic devastation wrought by the coronavirus pandemic.

County taxpayers faced a March 1 deadline to pay their first-installment bill for the 2019 tax year that represented just over half their tax estimated burden for the year. The second installment, typically due on Aug. 1, takes into account assessment reductions granted by the Cook County Board of Review.

Cook County Treasurer Maria Pappas said she has "grave and severe concerns" about keeping the Aug. 1 due date while homeowners and business owners are struggling to pay bills.

"We are getting emails and calls to our phone center in which almost every other email and call is, 'Will there be an extension on the due date?'" Pappas told *The Daily Line* on Wednesday. "I say to them, I don't have an answer right now, because I think minds bigger than mine will make a reasonable decision about this."

Pappas — whose office collects property taxes for hundreds of municipalities, school districts and other taxing bodies across the county — does not have the authority to delay the deadline, which is set by state law. But Preckwinkle or **Gov. JB Pritzker** could use their emergency powers to push the date back, she said.

Pappas added that her staff would have to reenter the Downtown county building, which is currently closed to most visitors and employees, by June in order to get bills out on schedule in early July.

“How can you print bills if the building’s not open?” Pappas said. “If there’s still a lockdown, how are you going to go in there and print?”

Chicago and county leaders have delayed collecting some sales taxes in an effort to keep businesses afloat, and the Illinois and federal government have both pushed the deadline to file income taxes from April 15 to July 15.

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However, Preckwinkle said on Wednesday that she was reticent to take any action that deprives local governments of sorely needed revenue.

“When we send out the tax bills and collect revenues, it’s on behalf not just of ourselves, but every local unit of government in the county,” Preckwinkle told reporters at a news conference where she urged residents to participate in the U.S. Census. “So a decision by us to delay payments beyond August 1 would impact all government units in the county, and frankly, I’m disinclined to do that.”

Prior to 2012, the county consistently sent out property tax bills after the August deadline, and municipalities were forced to take out bonds every year to bridge the revenue gap, Preckwinkle said.

Pritzker said Wednesday the decision to delay the deadline was in the hands of local leaders who reap property tax revenues.

“A lot of it has to do with the local, county and city governments, and whether they can

function without cash flow and how they could get it done,” the governor said.

Pritzker later confirmed through a spokesperson that he is not considering an executive order to delay the Aug. 1 deadline.

Asked during her Wednesday press conference about a potential delay in the deadline, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot said the question “has to be placed with the county assessor, **Fritz Kaegi**.”

Kaegi’s office issued its last appeal decision for the 2019 tax year in November. His team is now calculating assessments for the bill that will be due to property owners in 2021.

Any delay in the property tax deadline would likely land in murky legal territory, according to **Laurence Msall**, president of nonpartisan fiscal watchdog The Civic Federation. The deadline is carved into state law, but county leaders faced few repercussions when they sent bills late in 2011 and earlier.

Instead, the burden fell on taxpayers, Msall told *The Daily Line*.

“Yes, in the past they didn’t always get the bills out in August, but it was very expensive” for taxing districts that were forced to take on extra debt, Msall said.

Taxing bodies had to pay interest on those loans, “money the taxpayers never got back,” Msall said. “It was just financing the cost of inefficient government.”

“If bills are not sent out on time, then revenue is not coming in on time, and governments are going to have to figure out a way to make up that shortfall,” Msall said. “It’s not enough for people to say they shouldn’t have to pay their bill. They also have to say who should pay the bill for police [officers] and fire[fighters], who should pay the bill for teachers.

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About Alex Nitkin

@ | alex@thedailyline.net

Alex Nitkin is The Daily Line's reporter covering Cook County and Chicago land use policy. He came to TDL from The Real Deal Chicago, where he covered Chicago real estate news. He previously worked at DNAinfo, first as a breaking news reporter, and then as a neighborhood reporter covering the city's Northwest Side. Nitkin graduated from Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism with a bachelor's degree.

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