

Local Writer Greeted by Enthusiastic Audience
by Merrill Miller

Ben Joravsky started his portion of last weeks [October 24th] Jefferson Park Neighborhood Association meeting by saying that he felt like he was “speaking to the choir”, when referring to his subject matter of Tax Increment Financing (TIF). As a staff writer for the Chicago Reader, Joravsky has written many articles on controversial topics such as TIF’s, taxes, and corruption. He is also co-author of “Race and Politics in Chicago” which is described as a short, straightforward and fascinating history, starting with a 1919 race riot and ending with the election of Mayor Harold Washington. Joravsky remains dismayed that there isn’t more outrage about TIF’s and the problems he perceives they have created in Chicago. While they work well in some suburbs like Oak Park where the school board is outspoken on expectations for each new TIF district proposed, Joravsky maintains that the same cannot be said for Chicago. He describes the Chicago TIF Review Board as “basically a rubber stamp” with little or no opposition to new TIF districts.

Meeting attendees in general seemed to oppose the TIF concept from the start, though Joravsky was asked to briefly explain their design. He explained that taxes are frozen at the start of the TIF district’s 23 year life span. “This does not mean that taxes stay the same”. Instead schools, the Park District and other taxing bodies continue to request funds from taxes, and taxes continue to rise. However the excess beyond the freeze point go directly into the TIF fund.

“There’s easily 400 million” tied up in TIF’s throughout the city. He stated that the money just sits there unless it’s earmarked for a specific project. Often projects that drive the creation of a TIF district are much smaller than the funds the districts will accrue. But recipients of the funds for the specific projects push the TIF district creation forward because they feel they need those monies. Joravsky went on to point out that TIF funds are not subject to an independent review, and are not accurately represented in tax bills. When asked by an area resident what Chicagoans could do, Joravsky suggested that they learn, speak-out, and write letters to their local representatives and newspapers as a start.