Campaigning in Co-op City

by Gotham Gazette Staff
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Co-op City in the Bronx is the largest housing complex in the state. Built in the late 1960's as part of the Mitchell-Lama program , it is a self-contained city with over 50,000 residents, its own schools, a museum, and a shopping mall.

This fall, candidates running for City Council district 12 in the north Bronx will spend much of their effort trying to woo Co-op City voters - not only because a third of the district's population lives there – but because the incumbent council member and his Democratic challenger do as well.

City Councilmember Larry Seabrook said his record demonstrates his attention to Co-Op City issues; his Democratic challenger Shirley Saunders, who lost the 2001 race by just 103 votes, charges that the incumbent could have done more.

One key issue is property taxes, which the City Council increased by 18.5 percent in November 2002.

" Mr. Seabrook voted for that [property tax] increase," said Shirley Saunders. "Co-op City is largely senior citizens living on a fixed income and it would be harder for them to pay additional taxes."

Councilmember Larry Seabrook defends his record, arguing that the property tax generated revenue that helped save social services programs in the area. "The mayor wanted to do 25 percent; we did 18.5 percent," said Seabrook.

The incumbent and the challenger also take different views of the Bay Plaza Mall, a huge outdoor shopping center within Co-op City that contains chain stores and restaurants like Barnes and Noble, Toys R'Us, and Red Lobster.

Seabrook favors the jobs and the economic benefits the complex provides, while Saunders contends the shopping mall was poorly planned and creates traffic congestion. "Should an

emergency vehicle try to get into Co-op City around Christmas time, it can't because there is too much traffic," she said.

As in many areas of the city, education is also a concern. Children in City Council district 12 attend schools that are satisfactory, with average attendance rates, test scores, and graduation rates. The school buildings themselves, however, suffer from a host of problems, including aging facilities and overcrowding.

Seabrook said he worked to address some of the most urgent needs. "I've been able to accommodate all the schools within the district that have made requests to me for computer labs, for intercom systems, for gym floors to be fixed," he said.

District 12 also contains six other neighborhoods, including Williamsbridge, Wakefield, and Baychester. Curtis Brooks, who is running on the Conservative ticket (a third challenger, Republican Annie Gentle, could not be reached), believes the rest of the district is being ignored.

"Co-op City does take the spotlight because you have a lot of what they call real voters there," Curtis Brooks said. "In my section just below Co-op City, which is Wakefield, you don't hear a lot about the people there because you have a lot of immigrants who are unable to vote."

The race between Seabrook, Saunders and Brooks also has a personal and political history.

In 2000, Larry Seabrook left his State Senate seat and ran for the 17th Congressional District against incumbent Eliot Engel. Shirley Saunders, who lost a previous race for City Council in 1997, works as an aid to Engel. Curtis Brooks was once a strong supporter of Seabrook, but challenged him in 2001 as well. "After the first term and then the second term, I didn't find him addressing any of the things that pertained to our dreams and aspirations," said Brooks.

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Campaign Update:

Long-term issues facing Co-op City reached a critical point in July, when five of the complex's eight garages were closed after city engineers declared them unsafe. Riverbay Corp., which manages the complex, cannot afford the $20 million needed for repairs, leaving 7,000 drivers with no place to park their vehicles for the foreseeable future. The closures came in the midst of a threatened strike by the complex's 500 maintenance workers, which was averted after Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrion arranged last-minute negotiations.

Co-op City's problems have become New York City's problem. Riverbay Corp. required the help of several city agencies, including the mayor's office and Department of Transportation to find parking after the garage closures.

Candidates Shirley Saunders and Councilmember Larry Seabrook blame each other for not taking a more active role in trying to avert some of these problems.

"The current council person moved in when he was still [state] senator and it is not like these problems just arrived," said Saunders. "If I were a council person, I would have met with the Department of Buildings commissioner and tried to become proactive instead of reactive." Fred Lewis, Seabrook's chief of staff, countered that Saunders sat on Riverbay Corp's board of directors for 12 years. "Doesn't she feel that she has some responsibility for Co-op City since she was directly involved in the period of time that it started going downhill?"

In fundraising, Seabrook has the advantage. He has raised $39,900 and received $22,235 in matching funds. Saunders has raised $19,978 and will receive $16,514 in matching funds.

Curtis Brooks, who is running on the Republican/Conservative ticket, did not file with the Campaign Finance Board. A second Republican, Annie Gentile, has dropped out of the race.

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