

Development And Its Discontents In Race For Quinn's Council Seat

by Seth Barron

Thursday, August 22, 2013 10:35 AM



Corrected version. Please see notes at the end of this story.

NEW YORK — Manhattan's 3rd City Council District, covering the West Village, Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen, has been altered immeasurably in the last decade. Depending on your perspective, the last 12 years under the leadership of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, the district's current representative, have either destroyed the area, or remade it into a fabulously exciting international destination. Or both.

[The race to succeed Quinn](#) , who is term-limited and running for mayor, has come down to a contest between Yetta Kurland, an attorney in private practice who challenged the speaker in 2009, and Corey Johnson, chair of Community Board 4.

They are [expected to face-off in a debate at St. John's Lutheran Church at 6 p.m. tonight.](#) Hosted by the FIERCE, a group representing LGBT youth of color, the debate is open to community members.

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Both gay, both liberal/progressive in outlook and presentation, the two candidates nevertheless have engaged in a bitter campaign that has revealed important fracture lines both dividing and defining the district.

One of the starkest fracture lines surrounds the closure of St. Vincent's Hospital and the larger question over the future of development in the district. St. Vincent's had served the Village for more than a century and a half, and the bad "optics" of its closure and demolition — replacing nearly 800 hospital beds with luxury condominiums — horrified community residents.

Kurland described the hospital's closing as a "perfect storm of finances, attractive property, and the changing face of health care."

Run by the Catholic Church, [St. Vincent's Hospital](#) had run deficits for years, though critics argue that the hospital was forced to assume debt from other church institutions, creating an appearance of looming financial disaster that was largely accounting tomfoolery.

The hospital may have been mismanaged or needed restructuring, Kurland said, but its closure left an entire segment of Manhattan in a critical position without a major emergency room within walking distance.

[GothamVotes: 3rd City Council District](#)

The problem certainly transcends the 3rd district. The last eight years have seen hospitals around the city shuttering at the rate of about one per year — signaling a frightening trend in medical care that [has become a major issue in this year's elections](#). A new system appears to be emerging — at least in Chelsea and the Village — to fill the vacuum left by the closing of St. Vincent's: Walk-in care facilities have sprung up in storefronts and drugstores. Beth Israel is expanding its "urgent, non-emergency" primary and specialty care facility on Eighth Avenue and 23rd Street. This patchwork approach to health care appears to focus resources on caring for well-insured, relatively healthy people, while limiting exposure to the expense of treating emergency cases or the very ill.

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As part of the compromise that allowed the Rudin development family to purchase the valuable land under the hospital complex, Long Island Jewish Hospital agreed to invest \$115 million in building an emergency care facility in the landmarked O'Toole building. The facility, to be administered by LIJ's Lenox Hill branch, will be open 24 hours, and will include a two-bed "hospital division" for patients requiring observation and stabilization.

The state Department of Health, in recommending approval for the LIJ proposal, noted that the catchment area for the hospital is anticipated to grow substantially in the next few years, adding 35,000 new residents. The proposed clinic is explicitly described as insufficient to care for the large population expected to move into the district.

"None of the development in the area is being considered very intelligently," said Kurland, who was highly active in the movement to retain a major hospital in the Village. "It is like a city is being imagined where people don't get sick, or if they do, they have the resources to figure out an independent solution."

Corey Johnson, arguably the leading contender for the Democratic nomination, did not respond to repeated requests for interviews or information about his perspectives on the district. However, remarks he made during his tenure on Community Board 4 and his statements as a candidate have left us with a record we can evaluate to discern his positions.

{pullquote}Kurland's vigorous protest of the closing of St. Vincent's and Johnson's relative silence on the issue have factored into the electoral calculus this year.{/pullquote}

Johnson did appear, in 2012, at the final Council public hearing on the rezoning of the St. Vincent's site to accommodate the development of luxury housing. His comments appear to have been limited to acknowledging the "need for a full-service hospital on the Lower West Side," according to The Villager.

Gene Glaberman, president of the Chelsea Midtown Democratic Club and a longtime community activist, was deeply involved in the fight to retain the hospital. He said that during that fight "Corey was nowhere around ... I don't remember him being a part of it."

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Kurland's vigorous protest of the closing of St. Vincent's and Johnson's relative silence on the issue have factored into the electoral calculus this year.

It is no secret that Kurland angered Quinn by persisting in her 2009 campaign for Quinn's seat, even after term limits were overturned, eventually winning a third of the vote. Exposing the weakness of Quinn's support within her own district led to whispers that Kurland was not a team player.

But Kurland also embarrassed the health care workers union, SEIU 1199, which cooperated with the hospital in coming up with a satisfactory deal for the union benefit fund, by continuing to oppose the plan. Her stance made the union seem unsympathetic to the community.

On April 7, 2010, the same day that the union organized a protest to keep the hospital open, its leadership issued a statement praising the hospital's board for embracing a "realistic" solution and a "new model" of health care. The trade unions, starved for work, were also happy to see the deal go through. And, in the end, the entire Democratic establishment, including labor, has backed Corey Johnson, who has emerged as the candidate of calm and compromise.

Kurland, acknowledging that her advocacy may have cost her labor support, said that she "operates from a position of principle. I understand the calculus of the unions' decisions, but in the best case situation we would still have a hospital and the workers would be working there."

Development of real estate has to be handled gingerly, especially in a high-toned area such as the 3rd district. No one is realistically going to stop the proliferation of luxury residential buildings but, at the same time, the existing population of the district is highly educated and politically savvy, and willing to fight against the unrestrained destruction and re-creation of their neighborhoods.

Johnson's role in development and relationship to developers is not easy to parse.

When the longtime residents of the Chelsea Hotel were dealing with noisy construction and asbestos, Johnson helped mediate with the ownership to achieve a satisfactory resolution for

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both parties. Johnson also points to his work with the Related Companies in transferring an unutilized band of section 8 housing at Manhattan Plaza to a new development as evidence of his support for affordability.

The blade cuts both ways, however. While serving on Community Board 4, [Johnson worked for GFI, a real estate development company](#), as its community liaison and director of government affairs. GFI bought the Breslin Hotel, a relatively rundown single residency occupancy building on 29th Street and Broadway, and rehabbed it into the posh Ace Hotel. Many tenants got healthy settlements to leave, and others have remained. Not everyone is happy, and tenants were especially irate during the renovation, but as these things go it wasn't the worst example of its kind.

Both Kurland and Johnson have urged caution on the massive development projects in the works for the district. Johnson voted against the expansion of Chelsea Market, [though he did not share his views on the subject until the final vote, saying](#), "The proposed expansion would destroy the historic character of the Chelsea market building." The vote went in favor of the development.

This strategy of not speaking publicly on major decisions until the vote is taken may be pulled from Quinn's playbook. The speaker [notoriously works behind the scenes](#) without making open statements on controversial issues.

Quinn and Johnson share political backing: some of the same campaign donors as well as the blessings of local powerbrokers like state Sen. Tom Duane.

Both candidates spoke against New York University's plans for massive expansion of its campus, which Kurland characterized as establishing rights for the university to develop well beyond its footprint over the next century.

Regarding other major proposed and actual developments in the area, such as Pier 40 and Hudson Yards, Kurland said: "The city is always reinventing itself, and development helps that process. But developers don't have a long-term commitment to the community. We need to look beyond building buildings as a source of job creation."

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At this point in the campaign, Johnson has outpaced Kurland in fundraising, to a large extent because of his broad support from labor. Johnson has received endorsements and contributions from the UFT, SEIU, the correction officers' union, and RWDSU, while Kurland has DC37 and the transit workers on her side.

Though Johnson had asked Kurland in an open letter some months ago to jointly renounce independent expenditures, the Empire State PAC has put out a flyer supporting him. There is, of course, nothing a candidate can do about independent expenditures either way, though Kurland is presenting the support as an example of Johnson's hypocrisy.

Seth Barron, a former City Council legislative aide, [blogs at City Council Watch.](#)

A previous version of this story incorrectly reported that Quinn was supporting candidate Johnson. Quinn has not endorsed him. However, Quinn and Johnson share some campaign funders and links to local political establishment leaders. A previous version of the story also said that Johnson was in charge of organizing tenant buyouts at the Breslin Hotel. That assertion was based on unconfirmed information.