by Gotham Gazette Staff
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Â GENERAL ELECTION CANDIDATES

Stephen Kaufman (Ind/Con)
Jeffrey Klein (Dem)
John Fleming (Rep)

PRIMARY ELECTION RESULTS:
Winner: Jeff Klein (Dem)
Winner: John Fleming (Rep)

PRIMARY ELECTION CANDIDATES

Stephen Kaufman (Rep/Ind/Con)
Jeffrey Klein (Dem)
John Fleming (Rep/Con)
Egidio Sementilli (Dem)

CAMPAIGN FEATURE:

Filling a Criminal's Shoes

In New York, it seems the only way to defeat an incumbent politician is to put him in jail.

For 28 years, Guy Velella, a powerful Bronx Republican who served in both the New York State Assembly and Senate and as the chairman of the Bronx Republican party, was untouchable. Velella had a reputation of bringing millions of dollars in state aid to the Bronx, doling out political favors, and redrawing district lines in his favor - and he rarely faced a serious challenger.

Even a criminal investigation into whether Velella took bribes from companies seeking contracts to paint the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge did not slow the veteran state senator.

With an investigation underway, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani still campaigned with him, Mayor

Michael Bloomberg attended his fundraisers, and Republican State Senators - including Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno - donated $150,000 from their campaign funds to help pay his legal fees.

And voters â€“ in an overwhelmingly Democratic district â€“ reelected Republican Velella in 2000 and 2002, even after he had been indicted.

"Everybody's a crook," said Riverdale voter Ed Brennan after the 2002 election. "They all steal. I don't care."

Velella's legacy finally ended this year when the senator pled guilty to taking money from people bidding to paint bridges for the state. Velella is currently serving a one-year sentence at Riker's Island.

Yet the imprisoned senator still hangs over the campaign to fill the open seat in a horseshoe-shaped district that encompasses the north and east Bronx and parts of southern Westchester. Five different candidates want to reassure voters that they, like their predecessor, will be able to get results for the Bronx.

"Guy Velella delivered for the district, there is no question about that," said Jeffrey Klein, a Bronx Democratic Assemblymember who is leaving his seat to run for the open senate seat. "And I can deliver for the district as well."

Klein, who has been in the State Legislature since 1994, said if elected he will make things like increasing school funding and raising the minimum wage his priorities. He also acknowledges that in light of Velella's conviction and persistent gridlock in Albany, the system needs reform.

"The only means of reform we have is the Democrats," said Klein. "And first and foremost, I am the real Democrat in this race."

Klein's main opponent is Democratic Bronx Assemblymember Stephen Kaufman, who is also giving up his seat to run in the open race. Kaufman was first elected to the State Legislature in 1998 and previously served for eight years in the New York City Council.

Kaufman calls himself the "independent, unbossed, and unsupervised" candidate, and will run on the Republican, Conservative, and Independence party primaries. He also has a history of bucking the Democratic establishment. In 2000, he was part of a failed attempt to unseat Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver from his position.

Much of Kaufman's support now comes from Republicans like Governor George Pataki, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and State Senate Leader Joseph Bruno, who have all endorsed him.

But while Klein faults Kaufman for not being a real Democrat, another opponent criticizes Kaufman for not being a real Republican.

John Fleming, a former police detective who also performed security for Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, said he is running to bring Republican solutions to the area's problems.

"I think the Republican Party has gone too far to the left," said Fleming. "I believe in a two party system."

Fleming said if elected he will focus on tax reform, controlling Medicaid costs, and getting homeland security funding for New York. "With my background in law enforcement, I believe I can lobby at the federal and state level to get more money for homeland security," he said.

Also running is Democrat Egidio Sementilli, a marketing specialist and head of local day care center, who criticizes both Klein and Kaufman for being part of the political problem in Albany.

"Collectively they spent 30 years in Albany," said Sementilli, "and what would they differently do now that they could not have done already? What did they do on school aid? What have they

done about taxes?"

Sementilli said he would expand day care services, force Mayor Michael Bloomberg to give the current surplus back to tax payers, and put an end to "politicians paying off people with bogus projects" like a plan to replace the City Island bridge.

Whoever wins in November will have to navigate both city and suburban politics because the district straddles both the Bronx and Westchester. And even the Bronx sections in the district have widely different needs. Riverdale, in the northwest part of the Bronx, is one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city, while sections like Soundview are among the poorest.

Both Kaufman and Klein point to their local accomplishments as proof that they can serve the whole district. Klein said he established a 1-800 number for graffiti, hosted annual events to address asthma, and organized clean-up events across the area. Kaufman said he helped save schools for handicapped children from budget cuts, stopped a gas pipeline from cutting through the Pelham Bay neighborhood, and drafted bills against illegal dumping.

But the main issue for all the candidates may be to reassure voters them that the Bronx will not suffer now that Guy Velella is in jail.

"People are sad [about the conviction] because a lot of people liked him," said Kaufman. "But they are also concerned that the area won't get the funding it once did."

Working Families Party candidate Michelle Andrews did not return phone calls for this article.

CANDIDATE BIOGRAPHIES

Michelle Andrews (no information available).

John Fleming works as a vice president in a security and investigation firm in New York and a real estate firm based in Long Island. He is a retired police detective who coordinated security

operations for Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. He has worked on mayoral and congressional campaigns, and served as Public Safety Coalition director for Senator John McCain's 2000 Presidential campaign.

Stephen Kaufman has represented the 82nd Assembly District in the Bronx since 1998. He served in the New York City Council from 1974 to 1982. He is a lawyer at Alpert & Kaufman.

Jeffrey Klein has represented the 80th Assembly District in the Bronx since 1994. He has worked as chief-of-staff for Congressman James Scheuer and as a Democratic state committeeman and district leader.

Egidio Sementilli has been a long time activist and volunteer in the Bronx, working on several local election campaigns. He ran for State Assembly in 1998. He has been a member of Community Board 6, while also doing volunteer work for the Belmont community.

CAMPAIGN TRAIL

10/11/04
The candidate who won the Republican primary, John Fleming, is now receiving the support of the Republican leaders he once scorned and is running a vigorous campaign. And he has some marquee names, principally Rudolph W. Giuliani, strongly supporting his bid. For the Democrats, winning the seat is crucial to their long-term strategy of gaining the seven seats they need to gain a tie with the Republicans in the Senate. But the Republicans are just as determined to hold on to the seat. To underscore that point, state Republican leaders have been pouring money into the campaign of Mr. Fleming, 46, a former police detective who coordinated security operations for Mr. Giuliani when he was mayor. Mr. Giuliani is scheduled to hold a fund-raising event for him, and so is Joseph L. Bruno, the Senate majority leader. (NY Times)

10/06/04
Democrat Jeff Klein and Republican John Fleming are scheduled to debate on Wednesday, October 20, at New Rochelle City Hall. The candidate debate is sponsored by the League of Women Voters of New Rochelle and is open to the public. The third candidate running for State Senate District 34 seat, Stephen Kaufman, declined an invitation to participate in the October 20 debate. (Pelham Weekly)

10/04/04
Despite loses in both the Democratic and Republican primaries, Assemblyman Stephen Kaufman insists he is still actively campaigning on two minor-party lines for a Bronx-Westchester seat in the state Senate. A Democrat, Kaufman had originally been supported by New York's Republican leaders in the primaries, after Republican Senator Guy Velella was forced to give up his seat. Republican voters, however, rejected Kaufman in favor of John Fleming. Kaufman also lost the Democratic nomination after a majority of Democratic leaders supported for Assemblyman Jeff Klein over Kaufman. Kaufman has secured both the Conservative and Independence lines. (CBS)

10/04/04
Claiming he is "truly the independent candidate," Assemblyman Stephen Kaufman denied rumors that he will withdraw from the race for a State Senate seat. Kaufman described his opponents, Fleming and Klein, as extremists, too far right and too far left, respectively. (1010 Wins)

09/23/04
After an intense battle, Assemblyman Jeffrey Klein definitively defeated Assemblyman Stephen Kaufman in the Democratic Primary for the 34th Senate District Seat on September 14, 58 percent to 35 [ercemt. Despite support from Republican Governor Pataki and Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno and a win in the Bronx, Kaufman lost the Republican nomination. Performing poorly in Weschester, he lost to John Fleming. Kaufman did, however, win the Conservative and Independence party bids and says he is "still in the race." (The Bronx Times)

09/08/04
Supporters of State Assemblmember Jeffey Klein are expected to gather today to denounce ads linking Klein to abuses at nursing homes. Those slated to attend include State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer and State Comptroller Alan Hevesi, as well as City Comptroller William Thompson. (Crain's Insider)

09/08/04
Both Jeffrey Klein and Stephen Kaufman are winning backing in their contest for the State Senate. Klein has support from Senator Charles Schumer, former Governor Mario Cuomo and the Bronx Democratic Party, while Kaufman boast support from the state AFL-CIO and unions representing city teachers, police, firefighters and sanitation workers. (Crain's Insider)

09/07/04

The Riverdale Review charges that candidate Jeffrey Klein's law firm has defended operators of nursing homes that "have been repeatedly cited for violating the rights of the elderly." River dale Review
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08/29/04

New York Times Endorsement: Mr. Velella, a Republican, kept a long hold on a district with heavily Democratic registration through a deeply pragmatic approach. He used his clout as a member of the Senate majority party to provide goodies to his district, in the form of pork-barrel programs and personal political favors. The downside of his system is now apparent -- Mr. Velella is in jail for conspiring to take bribes from people seeking to do business with the state. The Republican establishment -- which recently managed to send the imprisoned Mr. Velella a stipend check to reward him for his role as deputy majority leader this year -- wants to hang on to this district. So the party leaders, still in that pragmatic mode, have decided to back a Democrat, Assemblyman Stephen B. Kaufman. Mr. Kaufman, who refuses to say whether he will turn Republican if elected, is taking no chances. He is running on four party lines -- Democratic, Republican, Conservative and Independence. It's hard to imagine anyone who fits into all these categories, especially in the wildly partisan politics of the State Capitol. In the Republican primary, John Fleming, a former detective, is mounting an impressive challenge to Mr. Kaufman. Mr. Fleming, a veteran police officer who worked with former Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, is ready to fight for reform -- real reform that starts at the top with the Senate majority leader, Joseph L. Bruno. While we do not agree with Mr. Fleming on some important issues, he recognizes the real-world needs of the state, including fixing the harsh, expensive and ineffective Rockefeller-era drug laws. We urge Republican voters to choose Mr. Fleming. In the Democratic Party, Assemblyman Jeffrey Klein opposes the omnipresent Mr. Kaufman. Mr. Klein is an energetic legislator who has displayed ambitions for statewide office. That may be what is propelling his promises to stand up for reform, but we will take reform in Albany wherever we can get it, especially if he manages to shed his connections to the Bronx Democratic Party establishment. He gets our endorsement. If Democrats nominate Mr. Klein, and Republicans go for Mr. Fleming, voters in the old Velella district will have a clear and decent choice for the general election in November. (New York Times)

08/26/04

Assemblymember Jeffrey Dinowitz, generally considered a liberal Democrat, has endorsed Steve Kaufman in the race for State Senate, even though Kaufman is also running as a Republican as well as a Democrat. When asked to explain the choice between Kaufman and Jeffrey Klein, Dinowitz said, "I've worked with both of them in the Assembly for 10 years and I know both of them very well, and I've found that Kaufman is more straightforward. . . . I don't always agree with him but I can trust him." (a href="http://www.bronxmall.com/norwoodnews/news/page2.html" target="new">Norwood News)

7/30/04

Assemblyman Stephen B. Kaufman has called the decision in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit to bring more money to New York City schools â€ irresponsible.' Unable to schedule a meeting, some 20 students, parents, educators and advocates marched on Mr. Kaufman's office July 23. [Kaufman] dismissed the march. â€ They're full of crap,' Mr. Kaufman said. â€ How dare they picket me." (Yonkers Tribune)

7/28/04

Westchester County Legislator Clinton Young, D-Mount Vernon, yesterday joined fellow Legislator Vito Pinto, D-Tuckahoe, in dropping out of the race for the 34th Senate District and endorsing Klein in a likely Sept. 14 Democratic primary against another Bronx Democratic Assemblyman, Stephen Kaufman. (Journal News)

7/22/04

The top two contenders for Velella's seat, Assemblymen Stephen Kaufman and Jeff Klein, each submitted about 5,000 signatures to the State Board of Elections, five times the number required to get on the Democratic primary ballot and probably a large enough excess to overcome any challenges by opponents. Kaufman submitted an additional several thousand signatures to get on the Republican and Conservative Party ballots, where he faces opposition from retired Detective John Fleming of Riverdale, and on the Independence Party ballot, where he will run unopposed. (Bronx Times Reporter)

7/12/04

Mayor Bloomberg, Governor Pataki, and the Senate majority leader, Joseph Bruno, will co-host a $1,000-aplate fund-raising breakfast for the presumptive Republican nominee, Assemblyman Stephen Kaufman, at Mr. Bloomberg's Upper East Side townhouse. (The New York Sun)

07/09/04

As a commanding state senator from the Bronx, Guy J. Velella worked the corridors of power in Albany for nearly three decades, serving constituents and, occasionally, himself. Since pleading guilty last month to conspiring to take bribes, however, Velella, negotiates a sullen concrete corridor on Rikers Island to his new jailhouse job: He is a commissary clerk dispensing candy, chips and toiletries to other inmates from behind a plexiglass barricade. (N YTimes
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07/09/04

A rare pitched battle for an open State Senate seat in the Bronx drew political heavyweights out yesterday to endorse a candidate running for the seat vacated by the disgraced Guy J. Velella. In a sign of the intensifying battle and the importance attached by the parties to controlling that seat, two Democratic rivals from the 2001 mayoral campaign, Mark Green and Fernando Ferrer, praised Assemblyman Jeffrey Klein, calling him a "real Democrat" and portrayed Mr. Klein's opponent in the Democratic primary, Assemblyman Stephen B. Kaufman, as a tool of Republicans. (NY Times)

06/22/04

The second district where the Democrats are concentrating their efforts covers the northern Bronx and a portion of Westchester County. In that district, Guy J. Velella, the veteran Bronx Republican, resigned from the State Senate last month and pleaded guilty to charges of conspiring to take bribes. Republicans are so unsure of winning that seat that they are planning to support a Democratic assemblyman who will seek the nomination of both parties and then join the Republican caucus if he is elected. (NY Times)

06/15/04

The thing that is wrong with politics is the thing that is wrong with Stephen Kaufman, who has been a Bronx City Council member and an Assemblyman for more than 30 years. He is the emblem of a bad breed. Term limits was invented for do-nothing drones like him. What makes Mr. Kaufman relevant is that he is running for the state Senate seat vacated by Republican Guy Velella, who has pleaded guilty to bribery charges. Mr. Kaufman is running in both the Democratic Party primary and as a Republican in the general election. A few years ago, Mr. Kaufman condemned nonpartisan elections, saying, "I'm against that â€“ parties stand for something." (The New York Sun.)

06/11/04

With powerful GOP state Senator Guy Velella resigning after a bribery conviction, the borough has lost a key player who delivered funding and legislation in the Republican-controlled upper house. But two state Senate races are shaping up as Republican-tinged with the Democratic contenders arguing they could fill the Velella gap. (Daily News)

06/10/04

With Assemblyman Stephen Kaufman, who currently represents the 82nd Assembly District, and Assemblyman Jeff Klein, who currently represents the 80th Assembly District, considered the two main contenders for the Senate seat vacated last month by Guy Velella, the coming weeks and months should prove quite interesting in terms of who is or isn't running for office in

the Bronx this November. (Bronx Times Reporter)

06/1/04

Thanks to Republican power broker Guy Velella's guilty plea to bribery charges last month, voters in his 34th Senatorial District in the Bronx and Westchester were denied the opportunity to hear the unguarded, innermost thoughts of their longtime elected official, as captured on bugs placed by state police investigators on the former senator's phones. But now that the race to succeed the eight-term senator is already hot and heavy, with candidates battling to claim ownership rights to the Velella legacy, a brief glimpse into some of the things that were weighing on the former senator's mind in recent years might be enlightening. (Village Voice)

05/27/04

Bronx Democratic Party Leader Jose Rivera also said yesterday that the party is backing Assemblyman Jeff Klein (D-Pelham Parkway) over his fellow Assemblyman Steve Kaufman (D-East Bronx) for the Bronx/Westchester state Senate seat vacated by Republican Guy Velella, who pleaded guilty this month in a bribery case. (NY Times)

05/27/04

Westchester Republicans voted overwhelmingly last night to support a Bronx Democrat, Assemblyman Stephen Kaufman, for the state Senate seat vacated this month by GOP stalwart Guy Velella. (The Journal News)

05/27/04

In what is quickly becoming the year's most interesting local political campaign, Assemblymen Stephen Kaufman and Jeffrey Klein will both compete for the State Senate seat vacated last week by Guy Velella, and Kaufman will also seek the Republican Party nomination. (Bronx Times Reporter)

05/25/04

Assemblyman Jeffrey Klein of the Bronx formally announced his candidacy for state Senate yesterday, setting up at least a three-person Democratic primary for the seat vacated by former state Sen. Guy Velella. (The Journal News)

05/24/04

With Guy Velella knocked out of the state Senate by a felony conviction, Republicans are weighing endorsing a Democratic assemblyman to run for his seat in the Bronx. Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno, in the strongest signal yet that Republicans are wooing conservative Assemblyman Stephen Kaufman to switch parties and run for the seat, last week called him "extremely capable." (New York Daily News)

05/21/04

The total failure of leadership by the Republicans and Democrats who are supposed to be running New York's state government often escapes the notice of average citizens. Lately, however, the corrupt nature of Albany's political culture has surfaced in unusually vivid ways, perhaps giving voters an idea of how morally and intellectually bankrupt the Capitol scene really is. Republican senators lost the powerful chairman of their Campaign Committee last week when Guy Velella quit the Senate, then pleaded guilty to a bribery-related charge. The Senate majority leader, Joseph Bruno, and 19 other Republicans had coughed up more than $150,000 from their various campaign funds to help pay Mr. Velella's legal bills. (NY Times)

05/18/04

The first time Guy Velella, the now disgraced ex-state senator, realized he might be in trouble was in early 2000. On February 11 that year he placed an urgent call to Vincent Velella, his father and law partner. (Village Voice)

05/16/04

Assemblyman Jeffrey Klein, D-Bronx, who has been raising funds for the 2006 state attorney general race, said he was seriously considering running for the 34th Senate District, which includes parts of the Bronx, Mount Vernon, New Rochelle and Yonkers, as well as all of Pelham and Eastchester. (The Journal News)

05/16/04

Bronx Democrats are lining up to vie for the state Senate seat vacated Friday by veteran Republican Guy Velella, who is expected to plead guilty tomorrow to bribery charges. (Daily News)

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