

## Atlantic Yards Dominates Debate in District 35

by Alex Kane

Monday, August 17, 2009 12:00 AM

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Photo (cc) [threecce](#) Atlantic Yards site



Sitting in a small pizza place in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Clinton Hill, City Councilmember Letitia James [seems unfazed](#) by her two Democratic primary challengers and even less concerned about an independent opponent -- in fact, she said she did not even know he existed.

When asked what she thinks of these rivals, James said, "No comment. I wish them luck, democracy is great" -- a familiar refrain [from the councilmember](#) . "I'm hopeful and prayerful that my constituents will reward our office and return us back to another term," she said.



Letitia James

James' challengers, though, have no qualms about criticizing her. In separate interviews, Democrats [Medhanie Estiphanos](#) and [Delia Hunley-Adossa](#) painted the incumbent as being more concerned with getting re-elected than serving the communities of Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, Prospect Heights, Bedford-Stuyvesant and parts of Crown Heights.

"Letitia James is a typical politician who has operated in the same way the City Council has operated. She knows who votes for her, she's much more concerned with re-election than she is with solving these problems," said Estiphanos, who was born in the African country of Eritrea and is a young, recently laid off "victim" of Wall Street's meltdown.

James, of course, has a much different view of her tenure in office. "In these six years that we've been in City Council, we have been visible, responsive, open, accessible, and I believe we have been involved in just about every issue, if not at the forefront of most issues in the neighborhood," she said.

Hunley-Adossa disagrees. In particular she criticizes James' opposition to [Atlantic Yards](#) .

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Hunley-Adossa says that the proposed arena and apartment buildings of Atlantic Yards would boost economic development in the district.

All three of the Democratic candidates in this majority-black and economically diverse district touch on similar issues: education, housing, and the economy. They say their community is struggling, and that the district needs affordable housing, better schools, safer streets and more. In addition, Atlantic Yards and community-police relations will likely loom large in voters' minds. Whoever wins the Democratic primary in this overwhelmingly Democratic district will face Republican/Conservative Stuart A. Balberg and independent [Osaretin Ighile](#) in November.

### Eyeing Another Term

James, who is running on the Democratic Party ticket and was bumped off the Working Families Party line because of a technical error, may well have decided that she has no reason to go on the attack. The power of incumbency is with her, and she has raised [over \\$42,000](#) and qualified for more than \$21,000 in [matching funds](#)

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[Estiphanos](#)

has no endorsements and has raised little money -- \$3,517. He says he is convinced he can win but acknowledged that it is an uphill battle.



Delia Hunley-Adossa

The other challenger, Hunley-Adossa, has raised [\\$28,429](#), but is not eligible for matching funds, because the New York City Campaign Finance Board is auditing her filings.

Hunley-Adossa, an active community member who is the president of the 88th Precinct Community and Youth Council, says she has the endorsements of 23 labor unions, most notably from unions that represent carpenters and metal workers. James says she been endorsed by a number of other labor unions and political groups, like [Service Employees International Union 1199](#) and the [United Federation of Teachers](#)

### Battle Over Atlantic Yards

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The starkest contrast between James and Hunley-Adossa surrounds Atlantic Yards, which would lie partly in this district. James vehemently opposes it, while Hunley-Adossa supports it. In one way, the election battle in this district can be seen as a community referendum on the Atlantic Yards project.

The controversial plan [calls](#) for an arena for the New Jersey Nets basketball team, as well as skyscrapers for offices and apartments. In the works for six years, the project has been delayed by a crippled economy, lawsuits and community opposition. Opponents [say](#) that the 22-acre development will "destroy" the neighborhood, accelerate gentrification, displace low-income people and create massive traffic. Supporters insist that the project will bring in jobs -- more important than ever during a recession -- affordable housing and economic development.

"I oppose an outside developer's vision for this community. ... I oppose the fact that low-income residents and small businesses are being displaced," said James. "I oppose the fact that this project wasn't subject to a vote by the City Council."

Hunley-Adossa said that Atlantic Yards will create "a lot of economic development, affordable housing, and [James] seems to have not engaged the developer into bringing forth some of these benefits to the community."

Estiphanos had largely minimized Atlantic Yards as a campaign issue and, in interviews, kept a neutral position on the development.

Hunley-Adossa runs an environmental non-profit called [Brooklyn Endeavor Experience](#) , which received seed money from [Forest City Ratner](#) , the developer of Atlantic Yards. Hunley-Adossa is also the chairperson of the Community Benefits Agreement Coalition, which signed an [agreement](#) with Forest City Ratner that promised benefits to Brooklyn residents. In return , the [local organizations](#) that were part of the coalition support Atlantic Yards because of the signed agreement. When

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pressed, Hunley-Adossa refused to say how much money Forest City Ratner provided her organization and fired back by saying James had funded groups opposed to the development.

James said that she has given City Council money to the [Council of Brooklyn Neighborhoods](#), a group that has criticized the project, and that she has personally contributed to [Develop Don't Destroy Brooklyn](#), the main group opposing Atlantic Yards.

### Policing District 35

When [Shem Walker](#), a 49-year-old Army veteran, was shot and killed in Clinton Hill by an undercover police officer during a drug sting in mid-July, police-community relations tragically returned to the district's agenda.



Medhanie Estiphanos

All of the candidates emphasized that community-police relations need to be improved to prevent such tragedies from happening again. Estiphanos said that police officers need to be humanized to ease tension between them and the community, and that he would like police officers to walk around in regular clothes and get to know the community.

Hunley-Adossa emphasized her 10-plus years as a precinct council president, and said she has always been interested in improving community-police relations. "I think that it is a tragedy what has happened," she said.

James said she would fight to reform the [Civilian Complaint Review Board](#) so "people [can] feel confident that when they report an alleged incident of police misconduct they're taken seriously," she said. James said that the New York State attorney general should be empowered to appoint an independent prosecutor to look into issues of police misconduct.

### On the Issues

Although the candidates' platforms touch on similar topics, they each have different ways of addressing them.

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Estiphanos wants to institute a program where 100,000 college students would mentor 100,000 local high school students in an attempt to increase rates of high school graduation. Estaphanos said he would work to expand charter schools, school voucher programs and adult education.

In an article on the New York Times' "Local" [blog on Fort Greene](#) and Clinton Hill, Estiphanos focused on mass transit. "Every time we increase fares, ridership goes down. This is backward thinking," he said. Instead, he called for free mass transit, which he said, would increase ridership, provide relief for the working class, and help the environment. While Estaphanos says that fees from congestion pricing would cover the costs, many estimates

[see](#)

such revenues as falling far short of what would be needed.

Hunley-Adossa said as a councilmember she would encourage community benefits agreements for developer initiated projects so that affordable housing is part of the plan.

She also wants to "increase youth and senior programs," and lamented that when she ran some of those programs it was tough to keep afloat financially. "I have a lot of environmental concerns. When I say a lot, cleaner and solar energy, and all that good stuff, and educating people, and I think that the more people are educated on what they can do to help the environment, the better."

James, while looking back on her six-year tenure as a councilmember, listed some of her main accomplishments as sponsoring the Safe Housing Act, which helps to ensure that people renting apartments get fast and full repairs; sponsoring a bill, which won passage, requiring the Department of Corrections to provide data on violence against incarcerated youth; the changing of parking regulations in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill to give relief to car owners; and streetscape improvements.

Looking ahead, James says the most important issues in her district include affordable housing, the displacement of long-term residents, harassment of rent-controlled and rent-stabilized tenants by companies that own their buildings, and improving education. She said she is working on a bill that would aim to curb harassment campaigns by private-equity companies. In addition, if re-elected, James said she wants the public to work with her on education, childcare, and on moving forward with a business improvement district for Fulton Street.

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"We've done a lot in six years. I think that I have honored all of the commitments that I have made to this district, in ensuring that they would have a City Council person who was just someone from the neighborhood who they could reach out to and who would be a voice for them," James said.

Her opponents, though, would say otherwise.