

In Lower Manhattan, an Incumbent Fights for His Seat

by Alex Kane

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Photo (cc) [atomische * tom geibel](#) A portion of Battery Park City

Before the City Council voted [to extend term limits](#) in October 2008, many City Council members' time was up. All of those elected when term limits first went into effect in 2001 would have had to leave office, creating open seats throughout the five boroughs. But once council members gave themselves another term last fall, many people expected that most incumbents would have an easy path to re-election. After all, over the last 20 years, incumbents have been re-elected to their seats 97.5 percent of the time, [according](#) to City Limits.



Alan Gerson

Contrary to many expectations though, this year some incumbent council members are facing tough fights. Among them is [Councilmember Alan Gerson](#), the representative from the first council district in Lower Manhattan.



Margaret Chin

He faces four challengers in the hard-fought Democratic primary: [Peter Gleason](#), a former police officer, firefighter and member of the Coast Guard, who lost to Gerson in 2003; [Margaret Chin](#), former director of [Asian Americans for Equality](#), who has run three times before; [Arthur Gregory](#), a former small-business owner and community advocate for Lower Manhattan after the Sept. 11 attacks, and [PJ Kim](#), a first-generation Korean immigrant, former management consultant and member of Community Board 1. Gerson, who has served on the City Council since 2002, is a lifelong city resident and former chair of Community Board 2. The winner of the primary will face a long-shot challenge from Republican Irene Horvath in November.

Beyond the Limits?

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While Gerson's vote to extend term limits has given him a chance to keep his job, it has also provided his opponents with a political weapon. Gerson voted in favor of the term-limits extension even though, days earlier, he [had called for](#) a charter revision to allow voters to decide in a referendum whether term limits should be extended.

Gerson's vote was "self-serving," said Gleason. "He violated not only democracy, but his trust with the people when he did that."

"He served his two terms. It's time for new leadership," said Chin, the only woman in the race.

Gerson defended his vote on term limits, and said that it was a "principled" but "agonizing" decision. Once his proposed charter revision was defeated, Gerson said, he thought "that the best of the worst alternatives ,, was to have an open election where incumbents and non-incumbents could run."



Photo (cc) [moriza](#) East Chinatown **The Community's Needs**

Term limits is one of the few differences separating the candidates. There isn't much disagreement over what the most important concerns are in District 1, a diverse area that includes Chinatown, Battery Park City, the financial district, Little Italy and the Lower East Side. All the candidates cited affordable housing, overcrowded schools and transportation as key issues. The continuing standstill over construction at Ground Zero [is another hot topic](#) .

In an interview, Gerson emphasized the "foundation" he has built over the past eight years to deal with area concerns and said that he will build on his "four pillars": livability, affordability, children and seniors, and cultural and economic vibrancy.

For example, he said he spearheaded [the changes](#) to the noise code and said he will push for the passage of legislation to [crack down](#) on noisy motorcycles. Gerson touted the opening of two new schools in the district that will help

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with overcrowding, but said it was not enough and that he would push for the opening of more schools in the near future.

Gerson said he also would work for state passage of the [Tenant Empowerment Act](#), which would give tenants first dibs on buying housing when landlords take housing out of subsidy programs. The bill was first passed in the city in 2005 when the Council overrode a mayoral veto; it now needs passage in Albany.



Photo (cc) [EJP Photo](#) Ground Zero rebuilding

Although he noted that the City Council has little say over Ground Zero, Gerson said that his efforts have led to the first independent environmental assessment of the site, and that he advocated for residents in his district to obtain adequate health services after the Sept. 11 attacks.

"We really have done a lot, and I'm excited about even doing more," said Gerson.

Not surprisingly, his opponents do not agree. Gleason, for example, thinks that Gerson could do more. He criticized the lack of progress at the World Trade Center site and said that he would demand accountability from all the parties involved.

"We need to address this issue. It's about leadership. Right now, there is no leadership in the first council district," said Gleason.

On school overcrowding, Gleason said he would introduce legislation that would require developers to build schools along with housing to accommodate new families moving in.

Gregory says he is primarily running on "access to government." With this in mind, he has

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promised to set up "virtual websites" that would have specific information for each neighborhood in the district. In addition, Gregory said he would expand health services and institute an "alternate street parking" plan for deliveries and bike paths, to reduce traffic.

Along with addressing traffic congestion and school crowding, Kim's platform centers on improving access to social services for vulnerable populations. He says that, if elected, he would make sure that government services for low-income people are funded properly.

"What we need right now is less people who are professional politicians or constant candidates but people who are interested in problem solving," said Kim.

Chin emphasizes her background as a former teacher and housing activist who grew up in Chinatown. If elected, Chin said that she would work to preserve and expand affordable housing, fight for smaller class sizes and more parental involvement in the school system, and seek to improve the traffic situation in Lower Manhattan by having better training for traffic officers and instituting more stop signs and traffic lights.

"I want to make sure that my City Council office is an office that people can come to -- to get help, to get involved," said Chin.

Race and Rancor

The agreement on issues, though, has not created a peaceful race. Instead, the contest has been marked by some harsh rhetoric, litigation over petitions and, in Kim and Chin's case, conflicts over ethnicity.

For a few weeks in August, Gerson was not even sure that he would be on the ballot. The city Board of Elections disqualified him [because his petitions](#) listed an incorrect address for his office. The Gleason camp argued that the Gerson campaign committed fraud because the Harry S. Truman Democratic Club, which was collecting signatures for Gerson and other candidates, corrected the petitions. Gerson argued that the challenge was "nonsense."

A judge dismissed the case [and ordered Gerson back](#) on the ballot, saying the Gerson

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campaign didn't commit "fraud at all," the Downtown Express reported.

The Gleason camp also challenged Gregory's petitions, and although the elections board found that Gregory had fewer valid signatures than required, it dismissed the challenge because the Gleason campaign was late in filing it.

Gleason also has repeatedly attacked Gerson's [attendance record](#), which, at 77 percent attendance, is ninth worst in the council. He accused Gerson of treating the council like "a club that he can show up to when he wants to."



PJ Kim

For its part, the Chin campaign brought a lawsuit against Kim, alleging that 5,000 of the 5,500 signatures Kim submitted were fraudulent. Chin's lawyer withdrew the suit just before the judge was to rule on it, because "it became clear that she had little chance of knocking Kim off the ballot," according to the [Downtown Express](#).

Kim, who is Korean, accused Chin of bringing a "meritless" lawsuit against him because Chin "wants to be the only Asian candidate in the race."

Meanwhile, Kim [created controversy](#) when he said Chin, who is Chinese, wanted to be the "mayor of Chinatown," implying that Chin's campaign was only focusing on the Asian vote and Chinatown instead of the whole district. The first district is about 42 percent Asian.

"Is he saying that Chinatown is not part of District 1? Is he saying that Chinatown is not part of New York City?" asked Chin, who added that Kim's comment was "racist."

The Clubs Line Up



Peter Gleason

Gleason scored a coup over Gerson [when he received](#) the blessing of the [Downtown Independent Democrats](#)

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, which endorsed Gerson in the past election. In addition, Gleason has been [endorsed](#) by the New York Metro Area Postal Union and former Bronx Borough President [Fernando Ferrer](#).

Gerson barely squeaked out an [endorsement](#) from the [Village Reform Democratic Club](#), a development that came as a surprise to many, given that Gerson was at one time the president of the club and was endorsed by it twice before. However, Gerson has received endorsements from other clubs, including the [Stonewall Democrats](#) and the 504 Democratic Club, as well as from unions such as the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association of New York City and the Uniformed Fire Officers Association.



Arthur Gregory

Kim's biggest endorsement came from District Council 37, New York's largest public employee union. The Jim Owles Liberal Democratic Club, a gay organization, also endorsed him. Chin won the endorsement of the Coalition for a District Alternative, an activist community organization that focuses primarily on issues of affordable housing, and education.

So far, Gerson has fallen behind in the fundraising battle. The council member has [raised over \\$77,000](#), but has not qualified for matching funds, according to Gerson, because of the confusion over whether he would get on the ballot. The rest of the candidates, excluding Gregory, who has about [\\$1,600](#) in his campaign chest, have qualified for public matching funds.

Chin leads the race for money, with over [\\$114,000](#), and Kim has raised over [\\$91,000](#) -- much of it brought in through the internet and Facebook, he said.

Gleason has raised close to [\\$41,000](#).