

Looking Beyond the Big Ticket Items

by C. Virginia Fields

Monday, August 01, 2005 12:00 AM - Last Updated Friday, April 12, 2013 04:24 PM

The four Democratic candidates for mayor discussed issues of historic preservation at a series of forums sponsored by coalition of groups, including Landmark West, the Historic Districts Council, the Municipal Art Society, and the New York Landmarks Conservancy. The following is an edited transcript of the candidate's opening remarks on June 22, 2005, and a sample of some of the questions from the audience.

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As a strong supporter and proponent of historic preservation, I look forward to the dialogue and an opportunity to work with you even more on issues that remain open throughout this borough and indeed this city. I am a candidate for mayor running on the basis of my experience, my accomplishments, and my vision for this city.

As most of you know I am in my 16th year as an elected official in city government, having served eight years as a member of the New York City Council, and now in my eighth year as president of the borough of Manhattan. In addition, I served for 10 years as a member of a local community board, and two years as chair of that community board. The work that I have done informs my vision for the city of New York. And my vision for the city of New York is very different from the direction in which I see the city moving.

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I want a city that is open, open in terms of opportunities for more, rather than a few. Where we work on the priorities that affect all of our daily lives, affordable housing, education, jobs, and so much more. We are a great city, but I think that we have limited our vision to the big tickets items whether it's stadiums on the West Side of Manhattan, which I have always been opposed to, or now focusing on stadiums throughout other areas.

We have many challenges before us. How are we going to prepare the next generation so they are on a career path for jobs? How are we going to make it possible for people to live in New York City with the high cost of housing and now with one out of five New Yorkers having to pay more than 50 percent or more for their housing costs? How are we going to maintain communities with character that it makes it possible through preservation initiatives?

I am pleased to have been a part of lobbying, advocating, and facilitating many of the historic districts such as Townsend Heights, Sugar Hill, NOHO, Murray Hill Historic District, Madison Square North, the African Burial Grounds, and Commons Historic District, just to name a few, as well as individual landmarks that include private buildings and public buildings such as schools, libraries, police precincts, firehouses, churches, and synagogues. And at the City Council, I was very pleased to have been a part and a leader in passing the Landmark Protection bill. This gave the landmarks commission the power to seek fines for violations of its regulations.

Like many of you, I came to New York because of the opportunities related to jobs, but I also wanted to be in a place that is historic in terms of buildings, as well as many other issues and contributions that have been advanced and made right here in New York City. So I realize that safeguarding our city's historic and cultural heritage is important in helping to stabilize communities and I'm very pleased to have been a leader in fighting for so much of that.

I agree that we must do more and government must be a leader in making it happen. With respect to commitment to tax incentives to building owners for restoration work on historic properties, not only do I fully support the state and the federal proposed legislation but would actively lobby in Washington and Albany and work with our congressional and legislative leaders in Albany in an effort to get these tax incentive bills passed.

I also would endeavor to implement a municipal tax incentive program to complement the programs at the state and the federal levels. But further, I would consider a tax credit or subsidy based on need in order to rehabilitate and adapt vacant historic structures. There are vacant

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historic structures that are left to deteriorate because there are no funds. There are no tax incentive programs that would encourage the refurbishing of vacant historic buildings that may get lost due to total neglect. It would also revitalize public schools where the board of education might not be able to modernize the building or perhaps renovate the building because of costs. So that would be an additional incentive to get these vacant buildings also renovated and upgraded.

With respect to preservation of public buildings, especially historic school buildings, yes, we must do more because indeed they are anchors in city neighborhoods and unfortunately we have lost too many of those building for residential development, homeless shelters, social services programs.

As mayor, I would establish what I call the School Preservation Conservancy, which would be comprised of volunteers, but assigned staff would assist it. This body would be asked to identify schools buildings that need to be considered for historic preservation. We have to put them in a protective program first while decisions are being made. We can do that the very first year of my administration and therefore prevent further demolition or takeover of these buildings while the Landmarks Preservation Commission engages in terms of its review, deciding whether or not based on criteria these buildings are eligible for landmark destinations or the National Register.

Also in my first year, I would create an inventory of all the other historic buildings that we believe should also be evaluated because we're losing the buildings by not protecting them or identifying them and not acting quickly to protect them.

With respect to funding an independent Landmarks Preservation Commission, I agree that the commission needs more money and the way that we do that is to allocate the necessary funds. It has pained me to see the reduction of dollars for the Landmarks Preservation Commission and a reduction in staff. This reduces the ability of that commission to do enforcement, to do follow up, to schedule the hearings, and move actively on a timely basis with respect to those hearings.

I would look to appoint someone to head up the commission who has relevant experience in the field of preservation, encourage input from communities, and create much more transparency so that all of us know what is happening within the commission. We will hold hearings on issues whether I think they are relevant, whether the commissioners think they're relevant or not.

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I also think that we need to strengthen our outreach and educational programs in the communities talking about landmarks. I certainly experienced this with a lot of churches in Harlem that were proposed to be landmarked. So I think it is important that we go back into the communities and do more of that. We also must increase staff in order to enforce the Landmark Protection bill. I recall in 1990 when I entered the council, that not only was the presence of the activists and the leaders in the landmark preservation community felt, but you played a very significant role in helping to shape policy, moving issues along, and enabling City Council as well as the mayor's office to get so much more done.

And lastly with respect to zoning reform that reinforces and complements historic neighborhoods, this of course should be done as was done in Tribeca.

There is much more that a mayor can do. I am fully committed to restoring the power, the presence, the value, and strengthening the work of the Landmark Preservation Commission but including the larger preservation communities because I know that is how we will be able to get this done. With that I prepare to answer any questions or respond to issues one might have.

INTEGRATING PRESERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

"We cannot make the landmark law work if we don't have the right leadership at the agency and the fun

Q: The borough president's office appoints the borough historian and I have been privileged to work with your historian's office. How do we integrate preservation and development?

Fields: As a matter of fact, based on the work of our historian, we will be releasing this week a brochure on all of the historic sites in Manhattan that relates to the African American communities: the churches, the museums, all of those have been identified and they have been put in a booklet.

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As we look for ways at integrating preservation with overall land use, we have given thought to how we would incorporate that within the City Planning Commission. We have to consciously plan for preservation and make it a part of the review process by simply assigning staff to do it.

2 COLUMBUS CIRCLE AND ST. JOHN THE DIVINE

Q: Can you explain your position on two issues? First, your vote at the borough board to transfer 2 Columbus Circle to the museum automatically meant the facade would be destroyed because the museum has already said that they were planning to do this. Second, the landmark and development issues surrounding the Cathedral Church of St. John Divine.

Fields: With respect to 2 Columbus Circle, this was a project that had gone through public review for over a year and a half. This was the project that had been approved at the local community board level, it had been approved in terms of the plans for the museum and the vote that was taken had to do with the sale. I believe it was the right decision to make at that time.

On St. John the Divine, our position on that was that the entire land, the entire area should have been landmarked, but that the church should have an opportunity to build on it because it was also tied into their ability to address their financial needs. But by having the entire area landmarked, that also would require input and oversight by Landmark Preservation Commission in terms of what would get built on that site and we believe that that provided for the protection and in terms of making sure that. If a building was ever built there, it would be in context with the character of the area and there will be some controls.

THE WEST SIDE

Q: I wanted to ask about your vision for the development of the West Side midtown area. Now with the stadium seemingly out of the picture, I wonder about your thoughts on public access to the waterfront and generally development of the West Side.

Fields: I was, and continue to be, opposed to a stadium on the West Side. I think it was the wrong location, it never made sense, and it still certainly does not make sense. About four and a half years ago, my office commissioned a study for the West Side of Manhattan. It was a study conducted by a firm that reached out very broadly to talk with people throughout the community at every level: community boards, civic organizations, community organizations, business leaders, entrepreneurs, real state, all of the stakeholders.

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What came out of that study is that we should expand the Javits convention center. It called for more of a north expansion with hotels at the northern part at 42nd Street. It called for hotels, small retail space, open spaces, but more affordable housing. Affordable housing at low-, medium-, and market-rate level. The site is large enough for all of that.

So specifically, our plan calls for housing on that site, and I think it was important at that time and I think that is still just as viable and important now that the stadium has seemingly been removed with respect to the West Side. So I take exception when it is stated that no one has looked at the West Side and no planning has been discussed. The problem was that this mayor came in with the view that he wanted the stadium on the West Side and nothing else got through in terms of those discussions.

Open space and access to the waterfront is extremely important. And that's an area where we can also look to preservation and opportunities to integrate the land use approach in preservation.

WHO WILL YOU APPOINT TO THE LANDMARKS COMMISSION?

Q: One of the most important things the mayor will do for historical preservation is appoint a landmarks commission chair. Four years ago, candidate Bloomberg promised to appoint a landmarks chair who had a proven record in historic preservation and a knowledge base in historic preservation. He did not deliver on that promise. Will you commit here and now that the landmarks chair that you appoint if elected mayor will be someone with a proven record in historic preservation and a demonstrated commitment to enforcing the landmarks law?

Fields: I commit. I do think that it is important. I would fully commit to that because, as I said, we have to give this commission value again and we begin to do that with the person that heads it up. Whether it is integrating preservation more fully into the overall land use approach, whether it is focusing on how we protect the schools that are doing inventories and fast-tracking the scheduling of hearings so that decisions can be made in a timely manor so that we don't continue to lose so many of those buildings.

We cannot make this work if we don't have the right leadership at the agency and the funding and the staffing to enforce the laws, to give the support to those who are out there trying to really work in that system. We can do it. But it requires again, leadership, commitment, funding,

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working together and again a commitment and I'm there.

REFORMING LANDMARKS

Q: Can we look at some of the regulations that may really go against the spirit of historic preservation?

Fields: I think it is important to periodically review regulations. So, yes. Absolutely. And I think again that a commissioner who has the right kind of experience, the right kind of a focus, can take on these kinds of issues and make things happen. And that's the difference here. It's not just managing an agency to make sure that all the workers come in on time, but so it is looking at all areas more comprehensively that effects the work and regulations.

GOVERNORS ISLAND

Q: Have you given any thought to Governors Island and what can be done to make it come alive again?

Fields: Not only have I given thought to it, but I also worked on a task force about four and a half years ago and we came up with what I believe it is still a viable plan. It calls for a conference center, recreational facilities, and educational facilities. Now, having said that, I know that this mayor has said that he will be issuing a request for a proposal and I am resubmitting my plan of those ideas. It can become a destination port, especially for many conferences, small conferences, educational groups and forums.

HISTORIC SCHOOLS

Q: You know about P.S. 109, a historic school that sits on East 99th street. It was recently closed. Why in this day with a shortage of classroom space is this happening?

Fields: I have been part of trying to get that school reopened, keeping it as a historic site and the battle has been with the School Construction Authority and the administration, which believe that it must be torn down. We don't want it to be torn down. We are fighting to keep it there and so all of this time it has not been used as a school. With respect to whether or not the School Construction Authority should have control over historic sites, that's why I talked earlier about the idea for a school preservation conservancy so that we can get our arms around these

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schools and put them into a protective class and fight to get the funding - public funding as well as private funding. So I think by taking a different approach, we can get something, more efficiently and more effectively.

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