

Housing is a top issue in the 2005 mayoral election for two main reasons:

First, the city has a record number of homeless people, about 35,000 people filling up city shelters on any given night, the greatest number since the Great Depression. That number is about 25 percent higher now than it was four years ago when Mayor Michael Bloomberg was sworn in. Second, by all accounts the city has an affordable housing crisis. Rents are increasing everywhere in the city, even in “rough” neighborhoods. While more housing is being built in the city, most of it is unregulated — the market sets the rents and that housing is doing very little to help address the affordable housing problem. Making matters worse, existing affordable housing is disappearing at a rapid rate.

Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the four Democrats who are seeking to replace him are positioning themselves as proponents of affordable housing and opponents of using a costly shelter system to deal with homelessness. They support building more affordable housing and solutions that involve getting people out of shelters and into permanent housing. They also support preventing homelessness before it starts by providing social services to people before they face housing crises.

BLOOMBERG’S MIXED RECORD

The mayor is running on his record. He turned his attention to homelessness about eight months ago, with a plan to reduce the record number of people in city shelters by two-thirds over five years. In 2002, he launched a [five-year plan](#) (in pdf format) to preserve and build 65,000 affordable apartments. If the plan is on track, the city could shortly announce that as many as 20,000 affordable apartments have been built or rehabilitated.

Advocates have given Bloomberg’s record mixed reviews. While his housing program was welcomed as a start, it is not nearly enough, according to [a critique by Housing First!](#), a broad and non-partisan coalition of groups pushing for more affordable housing in the city.

State Of Litigation Over Homeless Policies

On homeless policies, Bloomberg got off to a good start when he took over from Rudolph Giuliani. Negotiations with advocates led to a suspension of litigation against the city for its homeless policies — litigation that has had courts overseeing the city’s policies for over two

by Joe Lamport

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decades.

Giuliani's "was such a bad record, it's the only way Bloomberg's looks good," said Patrick Markee of the Coalition for the Homeless.

But the negotiations have largely fallen apart. And the city's recent attempt (see below) to deny people shelter if it deems them ineligible probably marks the end of the conciliatory attitudes on both sides.

New Housing Subsidy And Homelessness Prevention Program

The litigation aside, Bloomberg's efforts on homelessness over the past year have notably included a new housing subsidy for people on welfare and the launching of the \$12 million "HomeBase" program that has six community-based organizations working to prevent homelessness in six neighborhoods.

The housing subsidy was devised in the face of the city's loss of significant federal Section 8 subsidy, which helps about 120,000 poor households in the city pay their rent. It was better than nothing, some advocates said at the time. But since it actually came into use, it has infuriated many advocates. Among other things, the city is putting people in sub-standard apartments because [the subsidy's housing standards are lower](#) than for Section 8 apartments and doing little about landlords who seek side deals, including sexual favors, in return for accepting the subsidy.

Bloomberg should have fought for Section 8 rather than inventing a new subsidy that does not come close to Section 8's quality, advocates said. His challengers are harping on the mayor's conciliatory approach with his party in Washington, D.C., and Albany when it comes to housing issues.

The HomeBase program has drawn more support, but advocates said Bloomberg would get more praise for prevention efforts if they appeared sincere. For the past four years, he has sought to eliminate funding for legal services, which are much more effective at preventing evictions and homelessness than sending people for family mediation sessions.

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“If he’s serious about ending chronic homelessness, why does he keep zeroing out legal services?” said Larry Wood, director of advocacy at Godddard-Riverside Community Center and the president of the board of directors of my organization, the City-wide Task Force On Housing Court. “He keeps trying to eliminate anti-eviction programs. Something doesn’t add up.”

Many advocates consider some recent moves to be election year pandering, such as his publicly agreeing with city Comptroller William Thompson to ensure that about \$120 million from Battery Park City revenues goes to a trust fund to build affordable housing.

Urstadt Law

Bloomberg has flip-flopped, too, on at least one critical housing issue, advocates said -- [the repeal of the Urstadt Law](#)

. That 1971 law effectively puts state legislators in Albany in control of the rent regulation laws affecting more than half of rental apartments in the city. All of the Democrats running support repeal of the Urstadt Law.

Previously, Bloomberg said he supported repealing the law. In written responses to advocates’ questions for a candidates’ forum he missed earlier this year, Bloomberg said that the law should not be repealed because the city could not afford to administer the rent regulation system that the state currently administers. That’s a surprisingly weak excuse: The system is paid for by apartment registration fees paid by landlords. And if the state legislature is enacting legislation that is effectively eliminating affordable housing in the city, shouldn’t the mayor want to wrest that power from them “no matter the cost?”

Disappearance Of Rent Regulation

Finally, housing advocates “and many others” are despairing at the rapid disappearance of rent regulated apartments. Since vacancy decontrol was enacted in 1997 as many as 200,000 rent stabilized apartments have disappeared. The decontrol provision allows landlords to get apartments out of rent stabilization if they rent for \$2,000 or more upon becoming vacant.

“Bloomberg seems perfectly content to preside over the demise of the rent regulation system,” said Michael McKee of Tenants and Neighbors, a statewide tenants’ coalition. “I don’t think he has any inkling of how important it is to the future of the city. And his failure to fight to reverse

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the phase-out of rent regulation is going to prove deadly to the city.”

THE DEMOCRATS' HOUSING PLANS

Two of Bloomberg's opponents, Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields and former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, have proposed aggressive plans to build and preserve affordable housing. Ferrer's is the most ambitious: He would dedicate \$8.5 billion over ten years to build and preserve 167,000 affordable apartments. Fields proposes building 10,000 new apartments and preserving 8,000 more annually. Both candidates would [use rezoning plans to encourage developers to build more affordable housing](#)

City Council Speaker Gifford Miller, a favorite of housing advocates because of his record as speaker, came slowly to support a new lead paint bill, but once he did he got virtually the entire City Council to support it and the council easily overrode Bloomberg's veto. He also aggressively pushed the type of rezoning legislation Fields and Ferrer call for in their plans. The rezoning plans for Hudson Yards in Manhattan and Williamsburg-Green Point in Brooklyn will include about 20 percent affordable housing.

Miller's proposal to give renters a tax credit stands out as a unique plan to address affordability for people who have seen their rent go up while their wages have not kept pace. The Rent Guidelines Board, more or less under the mayor's control, has given landlords significant increases every year since Bloomberg took office. A household earning \$100,000 or less and paying a \$1,000 monthly rent would get a \$360 tax credit, under [Miller's plan](#). Poorer households that receive the Earned Income Tax Credit would get more.

On homeless policies, the Democrats vying for mayor would likely continue some of the city's efforts, but in a more constructive fashion. Advocates would likely be more involved, for example, in designing the programs. Miller has said he supports using community-based organizations to implement homeless prevention programs. None of the candidates supports using city shelters to deal with homelessness — it's simply too expensive.

The prospects of settling the litigation that has required court oversight of the city's homeless policies would be greater, too. Advocates would be more likely to sit down with a mayor who does not caricature homeless people as negatively as Bloomberg has, one said.

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Disappointing Aspects Of Their Records

According to a poll of the audience, U.S. Representative Anthony Weiner gave good answers to questions at an April candidates' forum on housing, but many housing advocates consider him a traitor because of his critical vote supporting luxury decontrol as a council member in 1994. [Luxury decontrol has led to the loss of as many as 200,000](#) rent regulated apartments in the city since 1997, from the city's most important stock of affordable housing: More than half of the rental apartments in the city are rent stabilized.

The records of Fields and Ferrer, too, make some housing advocates nervous about how either would approach housing issues as mayor.

As Manhattan Borough President, Fields has disappointed advocates by failing to block development efforts in Manhattan that do not include provisions for affordable housing. For instance, she supported the city's proposal for West Chelsea, submitting recommendations that advocates said would simply be ignored. A "No" vote would have forced the city to include plans for more affordable housing, advocates said.

While Ferrer presided over significant construction of affordable housing in the South Bronx, he supported a change to the Real Property Law that many thought at the time would lead to more evictions: the Rent Deposit law that requires tenants to deposit the rent they allegedly owe with the court during housing court proceedings. The rent deposit law did not lead to as many evictions as advocates feared, mainly because most landlords have not aggressively pursued forcing tenants to deposit the money. But Ferrer's support showed he had a soft spot for the landlords lobby.

Housing advocates said a Bloomberg second term would test his commitment to the housing issues he now professes to support. But they expressed satisfaction that all of the candidates are being pressed on housing issues.

But, advocate Larry Wood added, "we have to follow up."

Joe Lamport is the assistant director of the [City-Wide Task Force on Housing Court](#), a coalition of community housing organizations. Â