2005 City Council Races to Watch

by Gotham Gazette Staff
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City Councilmember Vincent Gentile knows his political world differs from that of most of his colleagues. "Everyone else's race is in September," Gentile said. "Mine is in November."

He has a point. The majority of the 51 City Council races in this overwhelmingly Democratic city were in effect decided in the September primaries. Some were decided more than just "in effect": In 12 districts, the Democratic candidate faces no opponent at all in the general election, not even from a so-called minor party candidate. These lucky politicians are mostly incumbent council members, but even Melissa Mark-Viverito is unopposed in her bid to fill an open seat in East Harlem â€“ a big change from the primary, which she won against five opponents by fewer than 100 votes.

Leroy Comrie is not only unopposed; residents of his Queens district will be able to vote for him on the Democratic, Republican, Independence and Working Families lines. Three other Democratic incumbents similarly will also appear on the Republican line on the ballot.

But this year, some Republicans hope Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg's popularity can help them increase their representation in the City Council; currently only three of 51 council members are Republicans.

Four districts feature particularly hard-fought fall campaigns leading up to the November general election. According to the Daily News, these races come in the districts "where Republicans are not DOA â€“ Defeated on Arrival."

Vincent Gentile, whose Brooklyn district includes all or part of Bensonhurst, Bay Ridge, Dyker Heights, and Bath Beach , is the only incumbent facing such a tough challenge. The other hotly contested races involve open seats, two on the East Side of Manhattan and the other in the northeast Bronx .

A total of 26 Republican challengers will appear on ballots in the city on Election Day. This includes the four - Patrick Murphy and Joel Zinberg in Manhattan, Phil Foglia in the Bronx and Pat Russo in Brooklyn - who have mounted formidable races, with money, backing and staffs, in districts with histories of support for both Democrats and Republicans.

Besides this, all three current incumbent Republican members of the council are also running for re-election, though one, Dennis Gallagher, has no opponent and the other two, Staten Islanders James Oddo and Andrew Lanza , do face Democratic challengers but in districts that have traditionally voted for Republicans. The Republican incumbents this year have raised at least seven times as much money as their challengers.

But many of the other Republican candidates have little name recognition or money. Some have not registered with the campaign finance system â€“ and unlike the man at the top of the ticket, Michael Bloomberg, they don't have a personal fortune to fund their campaigns. A few, such as Steve Bradian in the northwest Bronx and Stephen Lynch in Queens are real stealth candidates: no Web site, no listed phone number, no results from a Google search and not registered with the Campaign Finance Board.

The paucity of Republicans in City Council has become a rallying point for some of this year's candidates. When asked at a debate (click here for a transcript of the debate) how the council could be reformed, District 5 candidate Joel Zinberg said voters should elect more Republicans â€“ like him. "When you have one party, you usually get no debates and poor results," he said.

Some think the mayor â€“ who has been described as a "rino" (Republican in name only) could

help build the party in New York. In a column in the New York Sun, John Avlon hailed "the beginning of a hopeful evolution in New York City politics -- the development of a local Republican Party" where "fiscal conservative, socially moderate urban reformers can come together." The ultimate success of that endeavor, Avlon continued, could depend on Bloomberg, who "has the means and the reason to leave this legacy to New Yorkers."

But while Bloomberg supports the four Republicans in competitive races, he has not given them money, according to the Campaign Finance Board database. In fact, the one Republican who has received a campaign contribution from Bloomberg â€“ other than the mayor himself â€“ is James Molinaro, a Conservative Party member running for re-election as Staten Island borough president
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And although Bloomberg may be a boon to local Republicans, the party's national leadership can present a drawback. District 4 candidate Patrick Murphy said he gave money to George W. Bush's campaign only to get the opportunity to confront Karl Rove over gay marriage, not because he supported the president.

Here is a an update on four City Council races to watch on Election Day:

District 4: Declarations of Independence on the East Side

Residents of this area on Manhattan's East Side have elected many Republicans over the years. Patrick Murphy, a marketing consultant who has been involved in local and national issues, hopes they will again.

But today its council member, state legislators and member of Congress are all Democrats. Democrat Daniel Garodnick hopes the next council member will be too. (One of his opponents may agree â€“ Libertarian Party candidate Jak Jacob Karako first ran in the Democratic primary and recently indicated his support for Garodnick.)

Patrick Murphy, who is also the Liberal Party candidate, and Daniel Garodnick, who also has

the endorsement of the Working Families Party, have each raised about $190,000, with Murphy holding a slight edge. Both men point to a list of prominent supporters. And both vow to be independent, a characteristic they say is prized in the district. After all, the current councilmember Eva Moskowitz, who did not run so she could try - unsuccessfully - for Manhattan borough president, has broken with her party on occasion, endorsing Mayor Michael Bloomberg's re-election this year and harshly criticizing the teachers union.

Both Daniel Garodnick and Patrick Murphy hasten to declare their support for much of what Bloomberg has done, although they said they opposed the now defunct plans for a West Side football stadium. They are less enthusiastic about the city council.

"I think this mayor's done a great job," Patrick Murphy said. "But the council has its head stuck in the sand." (Click here for a transcript of a candidate debate)

Daniel Garodnick said he would seek to reform the Democratic bastion through such steps as putting limits on mailing privileges and reducing the number of committees; there are now 32 for 51 members. (Jak Karako would go even further, reducing the number of *council members* to 10 or so.)

Patrick Murphy and Daniel Garodnick both portray themselves as fiscally responsible. Murphy wants changes in benefits for city workers. "All of the things that have happened in the private sector in the last 20 year haven't happened in the city sector," he said, calling for the city to change its pension system and have municipal workers contribute to their health insurance. Calling himself a "fiscally responsible Democrat," Garodnick thinks the city must get its debt under control, partly by using some of the budget surplus to reduce it.

Patrick Murphy emphasizes his independence. As a member of the board of Log Cabin Republicans, a gay group, he fought the Bush administration on its efforts to ban gay marriage and joined the organization in its refusal to back the president's re-election last year. For his part, Daniel Garodnick distances himself from the New York Democratic Party, refusing, for example, to say whether he backed Fernando Ferrer or Michael Bloomberg in the mayor's race.

For more about district 4 and this year's campaign, go to Campaign 2005 .

District 5: An Insider Versus an Outsider on the Upper East Side

The race on the Upper East Side to succeed Gifford Miller, the council speaker who has to step down because of term limits, seems to hinge more on the candidates' resumes than on their stands on the issues.

After graduating from college, Democrat Jessica Lappin, who also appears on the Working Families Party line, had a brief stint in the private sector and then went to work as an aide to Gifford Miller, serving on his staff until she left to run for the council last spring. Her experience as a staff member, as well as her extensive knowledge of the district, would enable her to operate effectively in the council and "be an independent voice for progress and reform in the community," she said at a recent candidate's debate (click here for a transcript of the debate)

But Republican Joel Zinberg, who is also the Liberal and the Independence Party candidate, sees Jessica Lappin's background as a liability. He faults her for being "part of a political machine" and living in "a hermetically sealed world." In contrast, Zinberg, who has both a medical and a law degree, points repeatedly to his own "real world experience" as a doctor. Not only did he sponsor breast-cancer screenings, he said at the recent debate, he did breast cancer screenings. His background, he said, prompted him to offer a proposal to reform Medicaid, the health insurance plan for low-income people, and will help him contribute to emergency planning for the city. "It's important to hit the ground running but when you hit the ground," he said, "you have to know which direction you're going in."

So far, Jessica Lappin has raised about $145,000 â€“ more than twice as much as Zinberg.

Bloomberg has endorsed Joel Zinberg. Zinberg, in turn, said one reason he wants to be on the council is so the city "can continue the progress New York has made under the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations."

Jessica Lappin, on the other hand, worked for a man who sought unsuccessfully to unseat the mayor. So she points to what the City Council has done for the city, for example restoring the mayor's cuts in the arts budget. She also emphasizes that she is a Democrat, such as in a

discussion of health care: While she believes the United States should provide universal health care, until then, the state and city must help those who cannot otherwise afford it. "That's part of what being a Democrat means," she said, "taking care of people who need health care."

The two also differ over the mayor's planned reopening of a marine waste transfer station on 91st Street, where trucks would unload garbage to be put onto barges. Joel Zinberg opposes its reopening in any form, saying such a facility is inappropriate in a residential community near a park. Jessica Lappin said that she previously supported reopening the facility for recycling as part of an overall solid waste plan. But, she said, when the council reconsiders such a plan next year, she would oppose the waste transfer station. Lappin acknowledged, however, "the city has overburdened communities throughout the city unfairly," and the next solid waste plan "must adjust this."

For more about the district 5 and this year's campaign, go to Campaign 2005 .

District 13: Protecting the Northeast Bronx from Too Much Development

Democrat James Vacca and Republican Phil Foglia agree on at least one thing: Development â€“- or overdevelopment as some would have it â€“- is the biggest issue facing this swath of the northeast Bronx, which includes Pelham Bay, Throggs Neck, and City Island.

James Vacca, the Democrat, thinks his 25 years as district manager of the local community board give him the experience to deal with the problem. "I'm the one that reined it in," he said of development, pointing to the "downzoning" of City Island and Throggs Neck.

Now James Vacca said, he is taking the fight to the next level, making sure that developers do not evade the new restrictions. He said he recently noticed someone building a three-family house, something not allowed under the new rules. He complained to the buildings department about it, and about subsequent adjustments, until the builder agreed to construct a one family house with two parking spaces instead.

But Phil Foglia, a former prosecutor who now serves as executive vice president of a non-profit

housing company, thinks Vacca's experience is part of the problem. Calling the recent "downzoning" of the area to limit development "too little too late," Foglia pointed to Vacca's 25 years at the community board. "Downsizing could have happened anytime since 1989." Now, he said, "some areas are so dense people can't park their car on their own block."

Both men also said that education remains a big concern in the community. Phil Foglia said that, despite the city's push for new small schools, not a single freestanding small public school has opened in the area. He would particularly like to see a school for special education students and one for the gifted and talented in the Bronx.

James Vacca says the high schools in the area, Christopher Columbus and Herman Lehman, are simply too large and that the intermediate schools in the area need restructuring as well.

In a district that in many places resembles a suburb, both men point to concerns that may seem alien to most New Yorker. Phil Foglia would like to see a change in the tax code to help people who improve their homes. And James Vacca said that, as district manager, he received many complaints from people who need trees pruned, leading him to conclude the Bronx needs more money to tend to its trees.

Although Democrats outnumber Republicans by more than three to one here, Phil Foglia thinks the district would profit from having a Republican represent it. "It's important for the Bronx that there be a different point of view," he said, noting that the Bronx currently has no Republican elected officials.

Despite the Democratic edge in registration, both Phil Foglia and James Vacca expect Bloomberg to do well in the district. James Vacca said this does not worry him: "My district has a history of voting back and forth."

So apparently do some of its politicians. The area's current councilmember, Madeline Provenzano, who must leave because of term limits, is a Democrat but she has endorsed Bloomberg and is supporting Phil Foglia for council.

Phil Foglia has some celebrities backing him as well. Actors Robert de Niro and Chazz Palminteri each gave $2,000 to his campaign. Overall, though, James Vacca has raised almost $144,000, more than twice as much as Foglia.

For more about the district 13 and this year's campaign, go to Campaign 2005 .

District 43: Another Close Contest in Southwest Brooklyn

Probably no neighborhood of the city has seen more political squeakers in recent years than this part of Brooklyn, and most of them involve incumbent Democratic council member, Vincent Gentile. It began in 2002 when Gentile, then a state senator, narrowly lost his seat to Republican Martin Golden. Gentile then ran for the council seat that Golden had vacated and attracted city-wide attention when his campaign flyer featured a picture of Mayor Bloomberg's townhouse, thereby enraging mayoral aides jittery about security. Gentile won by a mere 31 votes. In November 2003, he held on to his seat by capturing 55 percent of the vote against Republican Pat Russo. That is a big margin by Gentile's standards, but it's relatively close compared to other incumbent New York City Council members.

This year, Pat Russo has a rematch against Vincent Gentile, who is also on the Working Families Party line.

Although Democrats outnumber Republicans by about two to one in this largely white district with a growing Asian population, they do not automatically pull the Democratic lever. And in this election, Russo thinks being a Democrat may be a liability because of Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg's popularity in the district. Noting that two other Democratic councilmembers in the area, Simcha Felder and Dominic Recchia, have endorsed Bloomberg, Russo faults Gentile for not doing the same.

But Gentile said he will stick with Democratic nominee Fernando Ferrer because of his stand on issues that "affect everyday New Yorkers," such as opposition to the mayor's idea of giving frozen meals (instead of fresh ones) to homebound seniors.

The two men paint a different picture of services in the district today. "In the two and a half years I've been in council, I've made things much better for people who live in the district," Vincent Gentile said. He said he has brought money into the district for libraries, schools, parks.

But Pat Russo said the district has gotten far less money from the city since Martin Golden left for Albany. "We need to make sure that we get a fair share of services back from the city," he said. Russo thinks that, as a Republican he will be able to do that. "At the federal, state and local level, I have partners I can work with to get things done," he said.

Both men see overdevelopment as a key concern in an area, where as Vincent Gentile said, eight- and 12-unit condominiums are replacing single-family homes. They fear that as Bay Ridge and other neighborhoods restrict rampant construction, Bensonhurst will become the prime target for development. Gentile said he would like to see "downzoning" extended throughout the area. "So far, it's been our most effective tool, " he said, though he added, "I'm not sure it's the whole issue." On development, Pat Russo said, he and Gentile "are moving in the same direction. I just want to move there now."

Both men, who have raised about equal amounts of money, see themselves winning what promises to be another close contest again this year. Vincent Gentile said he is well known in the district after his more than eight years in office and that people appreciate what he has done for the community.

A former aide to Vincent Gentile accused the councilmember of sexual harassment earlier this year. But as he campaigns, Gentile said, voters do not mention the charges. (He has not been found guilty of anything). "It's just not an issue," he said.

Pat Russo said he thinks he will reverse the results of the 2003 contest. He cites the signs bearing his name he sees on lawns in the area and his endorsement from New Era Democrats, as well as from the Republican, Conservative and Independence parties. He said he has mounted a vigorous campaign, quitting his job to run.

Ironically, he does see one potential problem -â€“ the Republican mayor's popularity. "I just hope that people don't take it for granted he's the winner," he said. "There's plenty of reason for people to come out and vote."

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