Booing the Yankees in the Bronx

by David King
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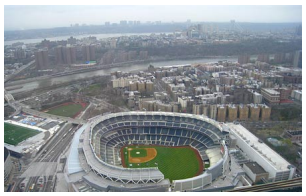
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The residents of the 16th City Council district have a new neighbor and a big one at that. The new $1.5 billion Yankee Stadium, which at capacity seats 51,000 screaming, hot dog eating, beer swilling fans was supposed to bring jobs and prosperity to the surrounding Bronx neighborhoods. But two-term incumbent Helen Foster and her primary challenger Carlos Sierra say the stadium has failed to deliver for Morrisania, Highbridge and nearby neighborhoods.

Helen Foster

For both candidates, the stadium symbolizes how projects the rest of the city might want are not necessarily best for their low-income district. During her time on the council Foster has been outspoken in her criticism of the stadium. "I was the lone voice on the council against Yankee Stadium," she said, "and now we are seeing a lot of what we were afraid of come to fruition. Local vendors have been left out. There was a recent article about a fruit stand there that is bringing fruit from out of state, from Washington and New Mexico."

Sierra has been active at protests at the stadium and says he intends to keep pressuring the team to build parks to replace the ones that existed where the stadium now stands.

Sierra, who was born in the Dominican Republic and raised in the United States, has lived in the Bronx for decades. He has served on the City University of New York Board of Trustees and is a delegate to the Bronx County Democratic Committee and a member of Community Board 4. Sierra is the lone remaining Democratic challenger to Foster's seat.

There was a horde of candidates vying for the seat at the beginning of the year before Foster announced she would seek a third term. Since then, due to petition challenges and Foster's decision to run again, the field of primary challengers has been whittled down to one. Another

contender, Mark Escoffery-Bey, was disqualified but is appealing the decision Thursday in federal court.

In his effort to unseat Foster, a lawyer first elected to council in 2001, Sierra faces a stiff challenge. He has raised $18,130, while Foster has amassed almost six times as much: $101,931. Sierra said he plans to win the race by "knocking on doors." He accused Foster of trying to coast in on her incumbency. "She is not in the community," he said. "She is not actively out there, because she feels she is the incumbent and has more name recognition."

More Than the Stadium

The race is not just about Yankee Stadium. Both candidates say their community desperately needs more jobs, better access to health care, increased affordable housing and better schools.

Sierra at a rally in front of City Hall

"The important issues are improving access to education and economic opportunities that will really engage the community and help them move up the economic ladder," said Sierra. He says that HIV has a heavy impact on his district, as does the high rate of asthma in the 16th district.

"People ask me to name the one major problem that faces my community, but I don't have that luxury," said Foster. "Jobs, health, housing are all big issues. It's hard to keep people healthy if they don't have a place to stay. It is impossible to make sure they are compliant with their medication."

Foster says it is even harder to stay healthy without access to fresh foods. "There is a real lack of fresh produce and meat at local stores," she said. "I want to work to increase them. Black women have a problem being able to digest milk, and a lot of these stores don't have soy milk or even skim or low fat."

On the Record

The real divergence between the two candidates concerns Foster's effectiveness.

Sierra says Foster is detached from her district. "She is not in the community. I think she doesn't feel comfortable in the community because they question her," he said.

Foster has one of the lowest attendance records among council members, at 73 percent, and came under criticism for being absent for the 2008 vote on congestion pricing. She said she missed it due to airport delays. Sierra also attacks Foster's vote in favor of extending term limits, saying it went against "the will of the people."

Sierra says he has experience organizing in the community that he will use to achieve his goals for his district. "I've been connected to the neighborhood. I've organized around housing; I've organized around higher education. I took the fight to Albany and City Hall. I know how to do it."

Foster dismisses Sierra's attacks. "It is part and parcel of being the challenger," she said. "I know for a fact I'm in the community at church and neighborhood groups. I go everywhere I am invited."

Foster defended her attendance record earlier this year, saying her district is 13 miles away from City Hall, which makes her have to weigh the importance of her attendance. "Am I going to stay in the Bronx and handle constituent issues or am I going to sit here through committee meetings?" asked Foster.

Foster said she is most proud of her work ensuring this year's budget did not unfairly slash services in her district. She says she has learned she has to fight to get the attention that her district needs.

"We work for the people who elected us and we've got to be able to fight for them," Foster said. "Rezoning to allow outdoor seating in lower Manhattan is not the bread and butter of the 16th district."