In East New York, an Outspoken Incumbent Faces Challengers

by David King
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Photo (c) doomdan515 Linden Boulevard in East New York, Brooklyn

Charles Barron knows how to get noticed. This past July, the council member from Brooklyn's 42nd district attempted a citizen's arrest of school Chancellor Joel Klein. He stood outside Tweed Courthouse demanding Klein show himself.

Barron claimed Klein was illegally occupying his office because the legislation authorizing mayoral control of the schools had officially expired. Barron didn't get his man, but he got his headlines and made his point. Both are things he has done often during his years on the council. But Barron has earned his share of criticism. He has been called a racist because of his outspokenness about black empowerment and for his involvement in the Black Panthers.

Photo from knickerbockervillage Charles Barron outside City Hall on Tuesday, July 28, denouncing mayoral control of schools

Barron has been a constant critic of the New York City Police Department, attacking it for racial profiling and incidents like the Sean Bell shooting. He has also been critical of his fellow Democrats, saying they have become too conservative. He calls Democrats 'Republicrats" and insists "The country is still controlled by old white men."

While some in his East New York district applaud his contentious confrontational style, others say it keeps him from getting things done with his community and working with the rest of the council.

Hoping to capitalize on those doubts, five candidates have piled on to face Barron in this overwhelmingly black, low-income area.

Barron is opposed by Winchester Key, Prince Lewis , Regina Powell , Carlos Bristol and Donnezzetta Brown

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"It's hard to beat an incumbent," said Barron, "Especially one who has done a good job, but I like the fact that there are challengers. We shouldn't take anyone for granted."

Getting Along?

A number of his opponents, though, say Barron is vulnerable because of his approach to his job. "You need to be able to work with your fellow elected officials," said Lewis, an educator from East New York who ran against Barron in 2001.

"He is seen as a homophobe and racist in City Hall. You can't get anything done if people won't work with you," said Lewis.

Winchester Key, an aide to former Assemblymember Edward Griffith who later ran for seat when it was vacated by Griffith's successor Diane Gordon, said he also has heard criticism that Barron has trouble working with others. "In general conversations you have in the community you do hear that." (Barron's wife, Inez Barron, currently holds the Assembly seat.)

A Change of Term Limits

Barron, though thinks the candidates are running to get their name out in the community in preparation for 2013, when Barron will be term limited out of office. "I think people are really running for 2013. They want to get their names out there for 2013. At the risk of sounding egocentric or braggadocios, I don't think they can beat me."

But the fact that Barron is running again this year, for a third term, has raised concerns from the community, especially because Barron was so adamantly against the extension of term limits, and told the New York Times he would not seek a third term.

"Charles Barron is delusional!" said Lewis. "Charles Barron shouldn't even be here! How can he argue against term limits and then take advantage of their extension?"

"I'm just an old timer, but when the people speak I think you should listen. We should respect their wishes," said Key regarding the two referenda on term limits, which the council vote essentially overturned.

" I didn't really see any change during Barron's time in office. But it doesn't mean he is a bad man, said Key.

Regina Powell, who has been involved in community organizing around issues of youth and education for almost 30 years," said she was surprised to see so many candidates in the field because it’s so tough to unseat an incumbent. "I thought it would be a challenge to run against the incumbent, but when you talk to constituents, they want to see change. It's not that Barron is a bad person. It's that people don't just want to put someone in there. They want to play a role. They want to be a part of it."

Supporting Schools

Education weighs heavy on the minds of the candidates in the 42nd district. Barron, for one, is still steaming mad about the renewal of mayoral control of schools. "We need to say no to mayoral control," he said. "We need to take our kids out of schools until we get a good form of governance. We can home school them. They aren't getting a real education in that test taking factory anyway."

Powell says she is in favor of increasing parental involvement and holding workshops to help parents understand how to help their children. "Bloomberg has done a good job on education, but we need to get parents involved," she said, adding that Barron's call to take children out of the schools is "not realistic -- you can't keep kids at home when parents need to work."

Powell said that she thinks Barron hasn't concentrated enough on bringing "resources for education" during his time on the council.

Lewis agrees that Barron hasn't brought enough "resources" back to the district. "Charles Barron is Kool-Aid with no sugar," he said.

Barron, however, points to $1.2 million in funding he says he secured for Linden/George Gershwin Park, and $10 million in restoration funds for City University of New York Students.

He said bringing money to the district has been his biggest accomplishment -- and his biggest challenge for next year will be fighting to keep money flowing. "The toughest thing is making sure there is a fair distribution in the budget. There is more racism in the budget than there is on the police force. It's the brutality of the budget. Our community should not look like this. Unemployment should not be in double digits. We have the largest budget of any city in the world -- larger than all African countries' budgets, larger than 48 states' budgets -- yet we have some of the lowest incomes in my district. That should not be, but it's this way because we have an out of touch billionaire mayor."

Carlos Bristol and Donnezzetta Brown could not be reached before deadline.