Housing Project Splits Bushwick District

by Dana Farrington
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Photo by Dana Farrington

Politics are personal in Brooklyn's 34th City Council District. Candidate Maritza Davila , a local community organizer, is running with the help of the Brooklyn Democratic leader, Assemblymember Vito Lopez , who was once a mentor and supporter of the incumbent councilmember, Diana Reyna . The third Democratic hopeful, Gerry Esposito , is hoping that the relationships he's built during his 32 years as district manager for Community Board 1 will help him break away from the pack.

District 34 encompasses Bushwick, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Ridgewood and Williamsburg. This predominantly low-income, Hispanic area has confronted the candidates with questions surrounding affordable housing, new development, job security and the general safety of its residents. A dispute over a proposed housing complex in a neighboring district has played a central role in the campaign.

Thanks to the extension of term limits that she helped pass, Reyna is now running her third campaign for the position. So far, the third time clearly has not been a charm.

"There certainly is a different component in the sense where, you know, my mentor, who at one point was supporting me, is now not supporting me -- but even further than that is supporting a candidate to run against me," said Reyna. But, she added, "I don't think we've allowed it to affect us." Instead, she said, the campaign has remained focused on the services it wants to provide to the community.

Nonprofits and Politics

Photo by Dana Farrington Diana Reyna

This is a district where non-profit community based organizations have become entwined in politics. In the 2007 book, Bargaining for Brooklyn , sociologist Nicole Marwell , a professor at the Baruch College School of Public Affairs, explains what she refers to as "voter education," where politicians help secure government funding for specific groups and then "educate" the population -- the voters -- about the politician's role. The Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Citizens Council , founded by Lopez, played an integral part in Marwell's research.

The senior council has played a key role in devising a plan for affordable housing on the Brooklyn Triangle in District 33 and also has been selected by the Bloomberg administration to develop the property. Davila has worked with the council since 1993.

The plans calls for building 1,895 apartments in low-rise buildings on the Broadway Triangle, a 31-acre plot bordered by Broadway, Union Street and Flushing Avenue. The plan requires City Council approval.

Supporters say the housing is needed. Reyna, though, has opposed the project. She said the project goes against the wishes of a number of community organizations and described her opposition as a way of standing up for various "voiceless" community groups and nonprofits that have not been included in developing the plan.

The Broadway Triangle Community Coalition has emerged as an opposing force as well. Though not against affordable housing, the coalition includes over 40 religious and community organizations that seek to open up the planning process to more groups.

The city awarded no-bid contracts for the project to the Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Citizen's Council and the United Jewish Organizations of Williamsburg. On its website United Jewish Organizations describes itself as having a "well-established partnership" with the senior citizen's council.

Reyna said the Broadway Triangle has affected her City Council race. "I would say it has to do everything with the election. It speaks to the leadership as to who is going to be representing this constituency," she said. "Anybody who supports this plan will be turning their back on the community of the 34th district because it doesn't matter whether it's inside our outside the

community district, the point is it's part of the community and whatever's built there we should have access to it."

Davila could not be reached for comment.

As district manager of the community board that oversees the area, Esposito approved the plan with stipulations.

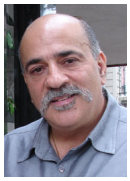
Photo by Dana Farrington Gerry Esposito

"The community board reviewed what was placed before us for property that was -- lest we not forget it has been empty for decades, alright -- and we saw the possibility of bringing affordable housing into the community, and the community board accepted it with conditions," said Esposito.

Despite his involvement, Esposito tried to distance himself from the controversy.

"I think people are familiar with my positions as district manager for the Community Board for the past 32 years, and they know that I'm a fair and honest person, and I want to bring fairness and honesty to the City Council," he said. "I want to bring government back to the people."

In general, Esposito is wary of links between nonprofit work with politics. "I think they [community based organization] are very important... Oftentimes they provide services where the city is void," he said. "However, I think they need to stay one million percent clear of the political process."

Lining Up Support

A sign for Davila hangs in the window of a local Internet spot on a corner along Wyckoff Avenue in Bushwick. The business is about a block away from Davila's campaign headquarters at the

Bushwick Democratic Club, founded by Lopez. Victor Borja owns the business that proudly displays Davila's smiling face. Wearing a Mexican soccer jersey and shorts, Borja explained his reason for supporting Davila.

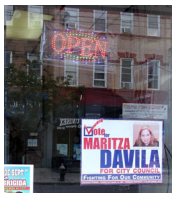

Photo by Dana Farrington

"Because we know her, because she has chatted with us, even if they're get-togethers, she's here in the area," he said in Spanish. Borja later added, "We hope she wins, and all of us Hispanics in this area are going to vote for her, including me."

Approximately 60 percent of the district's residents are Hispanic. Davila, born in Puerto Rico, is the only one of the three, born outside of New York. Reyna is the first woman of Dominican descent on the City Council, and Esposito's grandparents emigrated from Argentina in the early 1900s.

Just a few blocks away on the last Sunday in August, a handful of local community-based organizations gathered in MarĂ-a Hernandez Park with Reyna's blessing for a back-to-school event co-organized by her liaison Francisco Mercado.

Local resident Gwen Schantz handed out fliers and free food to families in the park. Schantz, 28, is the founder of the Bushwick Food Co-op , a group organizing to open a storefront food co-op in the area. Schantz has decided to vote for Reyna on Sept. 15.

"For the food co-op, she has been very supportive of our plan, and she's given us advice with regards to how we should reach out to the community," said Schantz. She later admitted that she did not know "very much" about the other candidates, but said she "just lean[ed] in the direction of Diana Reyna because I like what she's done thus far."

Representing the District

As for Esposito, he consistently refers to his experience as district manager and his lifelong familiarity with Williamsburg as having prepared him for the job of councilmember. Esposito has

worked closely with small businesses and their owners during his time on the Community Board and said he hoped to strengthen and not strain small businesses during financially difficult times. In terms of organizations providing services to the community, Esposito pointed to the need to "think outside the box."

"You can't just throw money at issues. You have to make sure that money is going appropriately to solve the problem so it will address the issue," he said.

Reyna said Esposito had done a "great job" in his position, but did not accept that this necessarily qualified him for City Council. The district, Reyna said, includes not one, but three, community boards, and any council member must reconcile the distinct needs of all these communities is unique to her position. In addition, every councilmember has to work with the other 50 members, and Reyna said she already had the "good relationships."

Reyna said her priorities had not changed over the last eight years. Her platform still emphasizes affordable housing, job creation and education.

Davila, whose website feature a picture of her with Lopez, says on the site she will work for rezoning for projects that are "100 percent affordable." Her platform offers few specifics. In education, for example, its cites her experience as president of Community School Board 32 and said she " understands the needs that are needed inside of classrooms, that will benefit our children."

Beyond Vito Lopez

For the campaign, Davila has secured not only Lopez's help, but also the endorsement and financial contribution from Local 1199 SEIU and a number of other unions. Plus, she has the Working Families Party at her side, support usually provided to the incumbent.

In an email, party executive director Dan Cantor said, "Maritza Davila knows first-hand how hard New York's working families have to fight in this economic climate for good homes, good schools and good jobs. Her years of experience as a tenants' rights advocate and organizer will make her a strong voice on the City Council."

The New York Times has endorsed Reyna , as has the United Federation of Teachers, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, who also backs the Triangle Project and U.S. Rep. Nydia Velazquez. The New York League of Conservation Voters and the Greenpoint Star have endorsed Esposito.

As of the Sept. 4 filing deadline, Reyna had raised $84,414 in private funds and $84,122 in public funds. Davila had received $88,127 in private funds, with $84,122 matched by public funds. Esposito raised $91,424, mostly from a number of private local businesses and $73,028 in public funding. He has spent the most money thus far on the campaign and Reyna has spent the least.

The Democrat elected in the Sept. 15 primary will face Republican candidate Jacqueline Haro in November.