

A Changing of the Guard on Staten Island

by Dana Farrington

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Photo by [Jason J. Price](#) Miller's pharmacy in Park Hill, Staten Island

Supporters of [Deborah Rose](#) cried out of happiness on Sept. 15. The president of the [Staten Island Democratic Association](#) later said the celebration was more joyous than the party after the last month's run-off election for city comptroller.

The unusual level of emotion over Rose's victory arose largely because Rose, the Democratic candidate for City Council [District 49](#) on Staten Island, is well on her way to becoming Staten Island's first African-American lawmaker.



In a three-person race, Rose beat the incumbent, Councilmember [Kenneth Mitchell](#), in September's Democratic primary and will now face Republican first-time candidate [Timothy Kuhn](#) on Nov. 3. Kuhn and Rose will face off on issues like transportation, health care, education and the economy.

Third Time's the Charm



Debi Rose

This race will be Rose's third for the 49th district City Council seat. She [ran unsuccessfully](#) in 2001 and again during the [special election](#)

in February to fill the vacancy left when Councilmember

[Michael McMahon](#)

was

[elected to Congress](#)

. Mitchell, formerly McMahon's chief-of-staff, won in February, but lost by a wide margin to Rose this time around.

Initially Mitchell planned to stay in the race on the Conservative Party line, but he [dropped out](#) earlier this month. The Democratic support has been moving squarely behind Rose since then.

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Mitchell's name, however, will appear on the ballot.

Observers point to several factors in Rose's decisive victory. Dora Berksteiner, president of the [Staten Island African-American Political Association](#), said that the previous campaigns had given Rose name recognition. More significantly, Berksteiner said, people were wary of electing a politician, like Mitchell, with such close ties to his predecessor.

"I think people just wanted change, to be quite honest," she said.

A New Staten Island?

Rose said that, assuming she wins in November, being the first African-American to represent Staten Island would be significant.

"I think for Staten Island it definitely is an opening," said Rose. "One that they hadn't felt would become a reality any time soon."

Rich Flanagan, an associate professor of political science at College of Staten Island and co-author of a forthcoming book about Staten Island politics, said this election was "the first time we've seen the loss of influence of that Irish-American coalition" on the North Shore. He said those politicians held sway from the 1980s up to today.

African Americans comprise 10 percent of Staten Island's population. In District 49, they account for 23 percent of the population, with whites making up just over 42 percent.

Berksteiner said that Rose's victory would not have happened without support from all communities on the North Shore, and that Rose would work toward unifying the district.

"I think that she will serve Staten Island on both sides," said Berksteiner. She added that Rose would have to "bring that balance to the 49th district."

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Unlike Staten Island's two other council districts, the 49th district is primarily Democratic. Rose's primary victory is pretty much a guarantee of victory in November.

The Next Race



Tim Kuhn

Kuhn, though, might disagree. He said his success depends upon voters pulling away from party affiliations and concentrating on the issues. He said he is focusing on getting support from independents and veterans. Even though he is running on the Republican ticket, he said he is more of an Independent-Conservative.

"I'm a military person, so everything is logic to me," said Kuhn, who served in the Air Force for 20 years. "You don't do anything just because."

Due to the state of the economy, Kuhn said lawmakers should cease all unnecessary spending. Instead of bringing more hospitals to Staten Island, Kuhn said he would like to see more health clinics run by the North Richmond University Hospital.

Rather than bring the people to the hospital, bring the hospital to the people," he said. "That's something that's worthwhile to pay taxes for."

Rose said she had been working on this issue as a community activist and doesn't see a public hospital in Staten Island's future (it is the only borough without one). Instead, she wants to bring in money for the clinics that are already there.

Transportation projects, such as restoring the North Shore Rail Line, are "shovel-ready," according to both candidates, and should be built quickly to ease traffic congestion. Kuhn said he wants to improve roadways on the island and has also backed eliminating tolls on the Verrazano Bridge for island residents. Rose, who said she hopes to be named to the council's transportation committee, wants to improve the amenities at the ferry stations.

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Turning to the economy, Kuhn said he wants to ease unemployment by paying attention to local "mom and pop" stores and proposes revisions that would allow local businesses to use an individual's unemployment benefits as his or her wage. This would allow them to employ more people, said Kuhn.

Both candidates have a background in education. Kuhn teaches high school at the [Michael J. Petrides School](#)

in Staten Island and is the senior instructor and program director of the Air Force Junior ROTC unit, which he started in 2000. Rose is the executive director of the Liberty Partnership Program at the

[College of Staten Island](#)

, a program designed to provide alternatives to students at risk of dropping out. She is particularly concerned with overcrowding in schools and said the community needs another high school.

Paying for new educational facilities or roadwork in the district would not be excessive, according to Rose, and instead would compensate for what she sees as longstanding "neglect." "I just believe that the political will hasn't been there to improve the North Shore," she said.

In a position paper on education, Kuhn advocates making it "easier and quicker" to fire teachers who are not performing up to par. He also support extending school days and using after school detention for punishment. "We must bring back discipline and respect for authority to the schools," his paper said.

Rose has raised \$66,217 in private funds and received \$115,379 in public matching funds, according to the [Campaign Finance Board Summary](#) . Her biggest [contributions](#) came from union-affiliated groups. She has received endorsements from the United Auto Workers Region 9A, District Council 37 and its affiliated Local 1701, as well as by the Working Families Party and NARAL New York.

Kuhn has raised only [raised](#) \$1,660 in private funds, \$1,500 of which came from one contributor.