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Candidates and their Web sites

The 40th City Council district sits at the geographic center of Brooklyn. It is an area of immigrants. People from every Caribbean island, along with residents of other ethnic groups, populate the district, which includes part of Flatbush and East Flatbush.

The ten candidates running in the special election say they seek to represent everyone in this diverse community. But given the likely low turnout, many will have to motivate their base â€“ and often that core support consists of people who share their national roots. Eight of the ten candidates are black and have some connection to the Caribbean or Central America.

In 1991, the 40th elected the first Jamaican to City Council, Una Clarke. And the Clarkes still wield influence. Una Clarke served on the council until forced to leave office by term limits in 2001. Her daughter, Yvette Clarke succeeded her, staying on City Council until she won election to the U.S. Congress last November. The special election is to fill her seat.

In this race, the Clarkes have endorsed Mathieu Eugene, the one Haitian in the race. That support gave Eugene a boost in his quest to become the first Haitian on the City Council. But the large field leads most to believe this contest is very much up for grabs.

THE ISSUES

The candidates list an array of issues as being of major concern to residents of the 40th district. And while the candidates differ in their emphasis and offer varying solutions, the campaign has been marked by few, if any, clashes over policy.

Affordable Housing

Most of the candidates believe that developers should set aside a certain percentage of apartments â€“ about 30 percent, several said -- for affordable housing. Some also questioned the definition of affordable housing, saying that many homes the city considers “affordable” are

too expensive for residents of the 40th district. Wellington Sharpe said people in each community should determine what affordable housing means for their neighborhood.

Jesse Hamilton would survey the area to determine places where new housing could be built, while Mathieu Eugene would do an assessment of buildings to determine which ones are vacant “and figure out how we can help those owners and get affordable housing” in now empty properties. Similarly Joel Toney sees opportunity for development on commercial strips in the district where many building have just one story. He would encourage additional floors for housing.

Zenoba McNally, who has made housing the focus of her campaign and describes herself as “passionate” about the issue, said that “instead of building homeless shelters, the answer is more affordable housing.”

To get that housing built, “we have to talk about holding developers’ feet to the fire,” Jennifer James said. She cautioned that programs to encourage more economical housing have to be carefully crafted. “Once you have a loophole, people will take advantage of it,” she said.

While residents in the less affluent parts of the district want more development, those at the district’s western edge, such as in the Ditmas Park neighborhood, worry about too much development. Harry Schiffman, who lives in one of those areas, said he has been working to get landmark status for the neighborhood to protect the existing housing.

“You have to find a happy medium,” said Wellington Sharpe. “I would not be ready to build a 15-story house on every block but you cannot say no more building because people are coming into the community daily.”

Education

Most of the candidates expressed concern about the quality of schools in the area, particularly the size of classes. Speaking with people in the community, Mohammad Razvi said he found residents are “really upset about the size of classrooms. They really have to focus on

downsizing." As a member of the council, Leithland "Rickie" Tulloch said he would push for more funding to hire additional teachers and reduce class size. He would also like to see the Bloomberg administration abandon its push for publicly financed but privately run charter schools. "We need to have all of our funding invested in the public school system," he said. And Zenobia McNally said other activities, such as art and music, could serve to involve students who are not as interested in the traditional academic subject.

Many say that the changes in city's education system over the last several years have not solved the problems facing the area's schools.

The new programs have not helped student learn how to think critically, said Harry Schiffman, adding, "We need to have kids in our schools understand how to operate a business."

Jesse Hamilton, a former chair of a community school board, said that since the mayor assumed control of the public school system the "City Council has been cut out" and the administration has been trying "to use a corporate formula for public school system, which is really not working." That structure has made the school system less personal than it once was, he said, discouraging many parents from becoming more involved in their children's education.

Those obstacles are particularly daunting for immigrants said Mathieu Eugene. "There is a language barrier and a culture barrier," he said, and "the parents are working very hard. They are low-income people."

Jennifer James also has qualms about recent changes in education, particularly breaking large failing high schools into smaller schools. "It theoretically sounds great," she said, but James believes this approach adds more administration without improving teaching. "We have to stop thinking about administrative answers," she said and instead focus on teachers.

Karlene Gordon agrees. "It troubles me that the solution to failing schools is to shut them down," she said at a recent candidates forum. "I don't think that's the answer. The answer is to hold our leaders accountable." Closing schools, she added, "sends a horrible message to the community, a horrible message to the students."

Jobs

“A lot of people are looking for work,” said Jesse Hamilton. In some parts of the city, says Mathieu Eugene, as many as 60 percent of black men do not have jobs. Better training could help address this, he said, as would assistance for small business. Although such businesses are “the backbone of the community,” Eugene said, it is difficult for them to get loans and other help. “I would like to make it a little easier,” he said.

Jennifer James thinks the city should expand vocational programs within the public school system so young people who do not go to college can “continue to be productive members of society.” Wellington Sharpe would like to establish a training institute to teach marketable skills to young men and women not planning to attend college.

In a twist on that idea, Zenobia McNally proposes that government or private groups buy the long vacant Loew’s King Theater and let teenagers work with construction unions to renovate the building and learn a skill in the process.

Developers should provide jobs to Brooklyn resident, said Mathieu Eugene. If elected, he said, he would sit down with developers and tell them “I want you to be there but I want you to provide jobs for the community” â€“ jobs with fair wages.

Health Care

Residents in the 40th district have high rates of HIV and AIDS, diabetes, hypertension and childhood obesity, according to Jennifer James. But many residents, particularly immigrants, do not take advantage of existing programs that could help them confront these and other health problems.

Mathieu Eugene, a physician, said offering more information on health care is key and notes that he has helped provide free screening for colon rectal cancers and spearheaded health fairs in the district. But Eugene concedes not all problems can be addressed at the community level and said he would do whatever he could to push for universal health coverage. Many of the

small businesses in the district do not offer health insurance to their employees, Jennifer James said. She suggested City Council try to provide tax credits or other incentives to make it easier for them to provide such coverage for their employees.

Immigrant Issues

The many immigrants living in the 40th district often do not know about services available to them. Most of the candidates said they would seek to provide translation services and more public information to address that. Wellington Sharpe said immigrants often spend lots of money going to lawyers for routine matters. This is a burden he would like to ease by helping to establish a nonprofit agency that could offer some of those services. “When you are an immigrant and 50 percent of your income goes to rent, the small issues loom large,“ he said.

EXPERIENCE AND ENDORSEMENTS

Along with issues, the candidates stress their work in the community as evidence that they â€“ and not one of the nine others â€“ should be elected. Mohammad Razvi and Mathieu Eugene say they are already doing the kind of work they would do as council members. Both run community nonprofit groups that do extensive work with young people in the area. Hamilton cites his experience on the school board, while Ron Schiffman touts his work in housing issues. Joel Toney, Zenobia McNally, Leithland Tulloch and Wellington Sharpe all point to their time on community boards.

The candidates speak of their deep and long ties to the 40th district, And many point to their endorsements. Yvette Clarke and Una Clarke’s support for Mathieu Eugene garnered the most attention. The physician has not raised a lot of money and had not won the backing of a number of Haitian civil leaders. The man who did â€“ Ferdinand Zizi â€“ withdrew because of problems with his nominating petition.

On the other hand, Jennifer Jones had worked in Yvette Clarke’s congressional campaign. Saying she still has a good relationship with Yvette Clarke, Jennifer James said she did not know why the new member of Congress made the decision to endorse Mathieu Eugene. For his part, Eugene said his endorsement from the Clarkes and others indicates that his support goes beyond the Haitian community, although he added, “something I bring to the table is the participation of the Haitian community.”

The ethnic issue looms large here â€“ at least in blog entries and media accounts. A recent New York Times article
saw the race through that perspective. The contest, wrote Jonathan Hicks, “has become a test of ethnic primacy among the fervently political West Indian groups that are prevalent in the district. And just as Irish and later Jewish and Italian politicians clawed their way to political power by first capturing local offices in previous generations, the Caribbean groups are viewing this contest as a vehicle for showing their growing political clout.”

Wellington Sharpe said that people should vote for the best qualified candidate but then joked that, if people vote along ethnic lines he would come out ahead as Jamaicans represent the largest group in the district.

Most candidates say their support extends beyond an ethnic base. After September 11, 2001, Mohammad Razvi said, “I was afraid there was going to be a backlash against my community and other communities.” In response, he started the Council of Pakistani Organizations. But as a wider spectrum of people in the community began availing themselves of the group’s service, Razvi said the P in COPO came to stand for People, indicating, Razvi said, that he has a record of working with all parts of the district.

The Kings County Democratic organization has not officially backed a candidate, although Wellington Sharpe seems to have garnered the support of the most politicians, including City Councilmembers Kendall Stewart, Lew Fidler and Dominic Recchia and State Senator John Sampson. James cites the backing the activist group ACORN, Razvi has the endorsement of the District 9 union, while another Hamilton said that District 37, of which he is a longtime member, backs him.

THE OUTLOOK

Do not expect to see any television ads in this race but money still matters as candidates run phone banks and send out mailings. Mohammad Razvi leads the money race, according to February 1 filings, with $41,379. Jennifer James came in second with $27,413. Mathieu Eugene raised a mere $3,445 according to
http://blogs.nydailynews.com/dailypolitics/archives/2007/02/council_race_ro.php The Daily Politics, although he has borrowed $35,000. Wellington Sharpe boosted his campaign coffers by lending himself $25,000.

The sheer number of candidates makes the race hard to call. To Mohammad Razvi, the

crowded field is a sign of vitality. “I think that’s great,” he said. “It makes it more exciting. It wakes up people to participate. If there were just two candidates, there wouldn’t be that buzz.”

But others worry that so many contenders could enable someone with a scant support to capture the seat. Jesse Hamilton said it would be better if the law provided for a runoff rather than awarding the seat to the top vote getter, regardless of how narrow his or her margin. Reviewing the numbers, Hamilton figures that, if the weather is cold, turnout could be as low as 3,000 voters. That means, he said, that someone could win the elections with just 400 votes.

The Candidates:

Mathieu Eugene: A physician and native of Haiti, Eugene runs a non-profit organization that helps young people in the community.

Karlene Gordon: A teacher she has been involved in efforts to fight domestic violence.

Jesse Hamilton : Hamilton, who grew up in a housing project in the South Bronx is an attorney who has worked for the city Department of Finance for more than 20 years. He is a Democratic district leader, served as president of his community school boards and is active with a number of civic and political groups.

Jennifer James : A professional political fundraiser, James most recently served as finance director for Yvette Clarke’s successful campaign for U.S. Congress. She has also worked in campaign for Carl McCall, Kevin Parker and Fernando Ferrer. She was a founding member of the Council of Urban Professionals, which works to encourage political involvement and develop political leadership in black and Latino communities, and a lifelong a member of Lenox Road Baptist Church.

Zenobia McNally : A marketing executive who owns her own company, McNally ran unsuccessfully against Yvette Clarke for this City Council seat in 2005. She has been a member of the Community Board 17

Mohammad Razvi: Originally a business owner, Razvi now serves as executive director of the

Council of Peoples Organizations, a community group based on Coney Island Avenue that he founded.

Harry Schiffman : Director of government and community relations for Kingsbrook Jewish Medical Center, Schiffman has long been active with a number of community health, business and social service organization. He formerly worked for Public Advocate Mark Green.

Wellington Sharpe : A native of Jamaica but longtime resident of East Flatbush, Sharpe, a family counselor, is founder and president of a private company, the Nelrak Child Development Center. A member of Community Board 17, he has served on many the boards of many community groups and been politically active, including running unsuccessfully for State Senate.

Joel Toney : A native of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Toney was living and working in the United States when the island nation named him its ambassador to the United Nations. He has served on Community Boards 5 and 14, and is co-chair of the Environment Committee for Community Board 14.

Leithland “Rickie” Tulloch: A longtime financial officer for health care institutions, Tulloch has been a member of Community Board 17 for 15 years, particularly involved in land use issues. He was active in the effort to name part of Church Avenue for Bob Marley.

Campaign Finance Board Filings:

â€˜ Mathieu Eugene

â€˜ Karlene Gordon

â€˜ Jesse Hamilton

â€˜ Jennifer James

â€˜ Zenobia McNally

â€˜ Mohammad Razvi

â€˜ Harry Schiffman

â€˜ Wellington Sharpe

â€˜ Joel Toney

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