Anthony Weiner Was Not At This GOP Mayoral Forum #NYC2013

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NEW YORK — While former Congressman Anthony Weiner made his first mayoral debate with his fellow Democrats last night, the sometimes forgotten Republican candidates held a forum of their own in a Midtown Manhattan law firm.

In the flurry of likely voter polls and mayoral debates conducted over the last few months, the candidates for the Republican nomination have been lying low. However, all three came out for a forum hosted by the Republican National Lawyers Association at the Bracewell & Giuliani law firm offices.

Doe Fund founder George McDonald explained why one of the three Republican candidates needs to win in November by attacking the City Council for passing bills in recent months that have been criticized by the business community. He mentioned legislation that would prevent employers from discriminating against unemployed job applicants, block employers from running credit checks on applicants and allow noncitizens to vote in local elections.

"That's now," McDonald said. "Imagine when Mayor Bloomberg isn't there and it's one of these Democrats like Christine Quinn, who's leading the pack for these kinds of things. We're in a very dangerous situation going forward, because they literally override the mayor's vetoes on all of this stuff. So if they have a mayor that's encouraging all of this stuff … Oh, Lord."

The audience, a mix of 70 or so lawyers and rows of people dressed in suits and jackets, laughed at McDonald's cry for a higher power to intervene.

McDonald drew a direct link between jobs to public safety by framing his platform around his experience with the Doe Fund, the nonprofit he created that provides paid transitional work, housing and training to homeless or previously incarcerated New Yorkers.

McDonald also emphasized the importance of matching skill sets to potential employers beyond high-paying, specialized jobs. Every New Yorker, he said, needs a job.

Referring to Republican candidate John Catsimatidis, McDonald invoked one of the most controversial prospective employers and oft target of labor advocates to make his point.

"It's funny that one of my opponents who's a grocer doesn't want Wal-Mart," he said. "I do. I want jobs. And full employment is the answer to the future of our city. We have to provide opportunities for everybody, especially the people who don't have jobs."

McDonald also seemed to strike a chord with the crowd by bringing up a subject rarely discussed during even most Democratic forums: mass incarceration of minority New Yorkers.

"Caucasian get their drugs delivered to their homes, and other people go and deal on the streets. So the people who deal on the streets go to prison and the people in their homes use their drugs," he said, before adding that the party needs to reignite its classic virtues around personal responsibility and welfare over work for the neediest New Yorkers. "I know this is a hard truth to hear, but this is the message that the Republican Party has to embrace."

Catsimatidis laid out his own plan for the Republican Party's tenure in Gracie Mansion. Key to that plan, he said, was coalition building across ideological divides. The billionaire candidate brought up his recent endorsement by the city's Liberal Party, harkening back to the first Republican-cum-Liberal Party candidate, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia.

"Money is not an object. We will spend it," Catsimatidis said of his campaign coffers. "I'm not in this for the money."

Unlike McDonald, supermarket mogul Catsimatidis said that the city didn't need any more $8 an hour retail jobs. Instead, he said he would reinforce the work done by Mayor Bloomberg to bring high-earning jobs and industry to New York. Part of that plan, he said, would call for a tax freeze

on every tax that the mayor controls as a means to attract employers on the first day he's in office. As McDonald would soon point out, however, the mayor only controls the city's property tax rate.

Asked by the audience about the city's budget and the impact that workers' pensions and healthcare will have, Catsimatidis again fell back on his experience with his own business ventures.

"I've negotiated with unions for 44 years in my companies," Catsimatidis said. "I've never had a strike, and we've always worked it out. Both sides have always been happy."

Former Metropolitan Transportation Authority chief Joe Lhota had a similar take on the city's budget woes. Echoing the Bloomberg administration’s preconditions for contract negotiations with labor leaders, Lhota said that unions have to drop their demand for retroactive pay and that employees contribute to their health care premiums.

“We do not have the money and I will not negotiate for retroactive pay,” he said. “It will not happen. That money does not exist.”

Lhota compared the city’s ballooning health care costs to those at the state level and how only New York City fully covers premiums for public workers. During his tenure at the MTA, Lhota said he negotiated with the Transit Workers Union to make sure that its members contributed to their health care coverage.

McDonald tried to strike the same tone, repeating a position he’s held since the Bloomberg administration unveiled its plan.

“I seem to have a hard time getting this across because I haven’t tweeted any of my body parts to anyone,” McDonald said, “but the first thing I said in the debate where we were all together was that I will not sign a contract for any labor union that does not include their participation in the cost of their health insurance.”

Lhota was also the only Republican candidate to mention climate change during a question about reconstruction after Superstorm Sandy. While all three candidates acknowledged the merits of being prepared and that a similar storm would no doubt strike New York City again, Lhota was also the only one who spoke out in favor of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's buyout proposals for Sandy-affected homeowners.

Lhota, who served as the MTA chairman during Sandy and the subsequent recovery, called for strengthening of the Office of Emergency Management.

"There was a very, very slow response on the part of the city and that should never, ever happen again," Lhota said.

Midway through the forum, Catsimatidis left for a fundraising event in Dyker Park, Brooklyn, but not before literally dropping the microphone. He missed out on what turned out to be one of the audiences' most contentious topic: bike lanes.

Asked specifically and succinctly if bike lanes were dangerous, McDonald began his answer by silently holding up his Citi Bike keychain, proudly brandishing one of the program's plastic blue "founding member" keys. The move was met with a smattering of boos and jeers.

"Doesn't mean I'm riding it," McDonald said. "I'm in favor of bike lanes and I think bad drivers, if anything, are dangerous."

The crowd again rebelled, forcing McDonald to take a sudden and unexpected sharp turn by giving an unprompted yet rousing defense of the city's police from political attacks.

Lhota ended up giving an equally perplexing response to the question: He defended bike lanes that are agreed upon by individual neighborhoods while fending off comments from the audience. He defended the city's recently unveiled bike share program while noting the importance of safe ridership.

The crowd gasped when Lhota said that the city had already seen its first cyclist death, even though there haven't been any confirmed deaths since Citi Bike's roll out over the weekend. The New York Daily News did report on a deadly bicycle accident unrelated to bike share on Monday, but the Lhota campaign didn't immediately respond to requests for clarification.

Lhota did criticize the program's rollout — specifically the city's response to complaints about bike rack locations and their impact on neighborhood traffic.

"The problem is that the Transportation Department is not working with the Police Department is not working with the Fire Department," Lhota said. "There's absolutely no coordination. We pay enough money in our taxes to at least get the city of New York to work with together on behalf of the taxpayers."

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