

Health Care, Development Dominate Debate in Forest Hills

by Urwah Ahmed

Monday, September 14, 2009 12:00 AM



Photo (cc) [beau-dog](#) A June street fair on Austin Street in Forest Hills

With its pleasant residential neighborhoods and fairly affluent population, District 29 in Queens avoids many of the ills facing the city's grittier areas. But like so many Americans, residents of this area have major concerns about health care.

The closing of hospitals and the delivery of medical services to the district's residents has been a key issue in the campaign for the City Council seat currently held by Melinda Katz, who decided not to see re-election and is running for city comptroller. Like people in other parts of Queens, residents of the area also are concerned about development.

The race features six Democrats: [Heidi Chain](#), a lawyer with the city Department of Finance who received the 2008 New York Police Department Woman of the Year award; [Albert Cohen](#), an immigrant from Tajikistan, who has his own law practice; Michael Cohen, who represented Forest Hills in the State Assembly from 1999 to 2005; [Melquiades Gagarin](#), media manager for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund; [Karen Koslowitz](#), a former City Council member; and [Lynn Schulman](#), the chair of Community Board 6.

The winner of the Sept. 15 primary will run against the Republican candidate, Bartholomew F. Bruno, in the Nov. 3 election.

A Hospital Shortage?

In a span of 12 months, three hospitals in Queens have closed. One, [Parkway Hospital](#), the city's only privately run hospital, was in District 29. (The other two were Mary Immaculate Hospital and St. Johns Queens). In the wake of the closure, residents of Kew Gardens and surrounding neighborhoods worry about a shortage of hospital beds and long waits at emergency rooms.

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Heidi Chain

The volume of patients at Forest Hills Hospital has increased by 40 percent from a year ago, and the number of patients who are being admitted is up about 12 percent, according to public relations spokesman for Forest Hills Hospital Terry Lynam.

"They [hospitals] have people practically in bunk beds," said Barbara Stuchinski, a local resident.

Chain expressed dismay that the hospitals ever were allowed to close. "They bail out banks, we bail out General Motors, and we didn't bail out the hospitals to protect the folks in Queens," she said, her tone reflecting her disbelief. To help fill the gap, she would establish a service helpline to provide immediate round-the-clock help.



Melquiades Gagarin

The closing has had very real effects, according to Schulman, who works at Woodhull Medical Center in Brooklyn. "The number of ambulance tours in the districts have gone down so response time has gone up," she said. She hopes to open an ambulatory care center in the district to provide immediate assistance to residents.

In Michael Cohen's view, the closed hospitals must be replaced. "Either reopen those hospitals or open new facilities," he said. "On a temporary basis, we should expand a walk-in clinic, but that is no substitute for a hospital." Money for this could come from a stock transfer tax or a bond issue approved by voters.

Albert Cohen would try to reduce the burden on the hospitals by promoting preventive care. To accomplish this, he would invest in medical screenings to identify health concerns before they send an individual to the emergency room.

Rezoning the District

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The recently approved rezoning of Forest Hill's Austin Street won applause from the candidates. Austin Street has become the trendy shopping destination for residents with big name stores such as Sephora and Barnes & Noble. The rezoning is intended to promote more residential development in the already crowded area.



Karen Koslowitz

Koslowitz, who has very distinct red hair, has been [credited](#) with shutting down strip club Runway 69 when she last served as council member. That helped create the current boom in development on Austin Street.

While Michael Cohen supports the overall rezoning, he has concerns about parking. "I am critical in the plan with the amount of mandatory parking that would be provided," he said.

Albert Cohen has also focused on parking problems in the district, holding a [press conference](#) to complain about angled parking spaces on 108th Street and the ticketing of driver who don't back into their spot.

On another development question, five of the candidates have endorsed the rezoning to limit sizes of building in the Cord Meyer area, but in a debate, Albert Cohen opposed the change. He said the new limits are aimed at the Bukharian community, many of whom have built large homes in that neighborhood. According to TimesLedger newspaper, the rezoning " has highlighted the tension between the Bukharians and non-Bukharians."

Gagarin would change zoning rules to allow for the creation of more schools.

As the area has boomed, rents have increased. Many resident worry about the expense and fear they might have to another neighborhood. Schulman, vowed to advocate for legislation that would let the City Council set rent guidelines, as opposed to having the state legislature do it.

In the Home Stretch

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The campaign has been largely free of acrimony, as the candidate compete for money and support in advance of primary day.



Albert Cohen

Chain, who has the support of many police groups, leads in fund-raising, but there's a bit of a twist. Unlike her opponents -- and the vast majority of city candidates apart from Mayor Michael Bloomberg -- she is not participating in the public finance system, reportedly because she does not think candidates should take taxpayer money in these tight economic times. She has raised almost \$207,000 in private donations -- with more than \$125,000 of that coming from herself.

Now it turns out Chain may not have saved the city any money afterall. City Hall has [reported](#) that Chain's fundraising and not participating in public financing "triggered a provision of the Campaign Finance Board program that gives opponents an additional \$95,000 in public funds. That equals \$7,000 more than she would have received had she joined the program and received matching funds for raising the maximum amount from others."

Among the others, Koslowitz has raised the most private money -- \$93,730, followed by Schulman with \$87,260, Michael Cohen with almost \$46,000 and Albert Cohen with about \$43,000. Gagarin trails with \$17,599.



Lynn Schulman

Schulman, who ran unsuccessfully for the seat eight years ago, has the backing of the Working Families Party and the Service Employees Union this time around. The

Times has [endorsed her](#) as well.

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Koslowitz, who has the Independence Party nomination, is [backed](#) by City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, who has campaigned with her.

Chain has support from several police groups

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