Democrats Move in on Staten Island's Republican South Shore

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New York State Senate-District 24:

The Candidates

â€˜ Bob Helbock

â€˜ Andrew Lanza

â€˜ Matthew Titone

Other Races

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The South Shore of Staten Island has had the same state senator â€“ Republican John Marchi â€“ since before the island was connected to the rest of New York City by the Verrazano Bridge. But after 49 years in office, the 85-year old senator is not seeking reelection, leaving the seat for the 24th district open. Two Republicans and one Democrat are vying for the spot, in a race that has the potential to play not only a local role, but also affect the balance of power in Albany.

STATEN ISLAND'S SOUTH SHORE

The Staten Island Expressway running east and west across Staten Island serves as an unofficial divider between the wealthy Catholic Italian neighborhoods of the south shore and the poorer, more ethnically diverse north.

The 24th District is a traditionally conservative area, and generally votes Republican â€“ a rarity in new York City. Despite this distinction, the area has more registered Democrats than Republicans. Matthew Titone, a lawyer who has done pro bono work for various AIDS organizations and sits on the board of directors for the Community Health Action of Staten Island, is the Democratic candidate. He lacks formal political experience and has raised only $37,000 â€“ far less than his opponents â€“ but comes from a prominent political family, likely boosting his name recognition.

Two Republicans are competing for their party's line in a rare Republican primary. Andrew Lanza is the current city councilmember for the South Shore. He is running against Bob Helbock, counsel for John Marchi and former chairman of the Staten Island Republican Party. Lanza has an edge in fundraising; he has raised $141,000 as compared to Helbock's $110,000. He also has the endorsements of Mayor Bloomberg, the borough's Republican Party â€“ the same one that Helbock once chaired â€“ and nearly every elected Republican official in Staten Island.

He has also held elected office, unlike Helbock. "Lanza will run on a record of accomplishment," said Rich Flanagan, an associate professor of political science at the College of Staten Island. But that record may also work against him : Lanza's 72 absences out of 153 city council meetings last year made him the councilmember with the worst attendance record
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Helbock has secured the backing of both Staten Island Borough President James Molinaro and outgoing Senator Marchi, his former employer. He will be running on the Conservative Party line as well. His attempt to also run on the Independence Party line failed due to a successful petition challenge by Lanza.

OVERDEVELOPMENT, TRAFFIC, AND RACECARS

All the candidates describe traffic and development as major issues.

"We had a traffic problem 10 years ago," said Titone. "Now it's a traffic crisis." He calls for a "real analysis" of traffic, and would like to see charter buses serving residents who work in New Jersey.

Lanza says that traffic issues have "really ravaged the island over the last 20 years," and helped motivate him to leave the public sector and run for political office. He wants to maintain the suburban character of Staten Island, and cites the establishment of a mayoral traffic task force and zoning restrictions to prevent overdevelopment among his accomplishments in the council. Lanza argues that a bus depot should be built, along with a ferry to the South Shore, so that residents do not have to make a "Lewis and Clark" expedition to get to Manhattan.

While Lanza implies that Staten Island politicians have not done enough to address traffic problems, Helbock thinks that "insufficient planning on a city level" is to blame. Staten Island, he believes, will need help from federal, state and city government to fix its traffic problems. Among his proposals is an expansion of the train that runs north to south along Staten Island's east side.

The controversial plan to build a NASCAR track in Staten Island has been a flashpoint issue for those concerned about traffic. The first public meeting on the proposal in April nearly ended in a riot, with the police shutting it down before any organized debate could begin. At one point Lanza's microphone was almost ripped from his hands.

Lanza has been a harsh critic of the plan, saying it has done "nothing to address the legitimate

concerns of [Staten Island]." Helbock also opposes it, saying the traffic plan is "unacceptable." Titone's view is less clear.

"I am not opposed to it," he said, "but not convinced it's good for Staten Island."

HEALTH CARE

The candidates have also taken strong positions on the state of health care on Staten Island. Titone says he would like to focus on health insurance policy in Albany. "Doctors are being hurt by insurance policies. The only [ones] doing well are insurance companies," he said.

He also complains that there used to be five hospitals on Staten Island, but now there are only "one and a half" â€“ the only fully functioning hospital being Staten Island University Hospital. New York City Health and Hospital Corporation, which operates public hospitals and clinics, does not fund any hospitals on Staten Island, and Titone says the corporation hasn't met its responsibility to the area.

Lanza says if he's in the legislature, he will push the public hospital system to provide service to Staten Island. He also suggested that, if necessary, the hospitals corporation would fund Staten Island's hospitals through "threat of lawsuit."

CHANGING ALBANY?

The Democratic Party will likely have several big names on its ticket this November , and it is hoping that Titone will automatically get the votes of Spitzer or Clinton supporters.

Titone is also relying on Albany's bad reputation to win him points as the candidate for change. The Republicans in the State Senate and Governor Pataki have "created nothing but a dysfunctional government," he said.

Helbock is also pushing for change in Albany, saying he would like to make all member items public, so that it will be clear where legislators are sending money.

This election may also have a big effect on Albany by changing the balance of the Senate. The Democrats are hoping to gain four seats in November, retaking the majority for the first time in decades. This makes the election in Senate District 24 a rare event in New York City â€“ one where party actually matters.

"Staten Island is the one place where a two-party system works," said Flanagan of the College of Staten Island. "It's a very interesting race â€¦ probably the only interesting [election] in the city."

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