by Dana Farrington
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Left image from ForumNews , right image from ElizabethCrowley.info Tom Ognibene, left, and Elizabeth Crowley, right, are fighting for the seat in District 30, a traditionally Republican stronghold in Queens.

The Republicans hold only three City Council districts in New York and have little chance of capturing many more next month. They do, though, hope they can win back District 30 in Queens, which currently has its first Democratic councilmember ever.

The battle this time around is between the incumbent Elizabeth Crowley and former Republican Thomas Ognibene , who served as the area's councilmember between 1991 and 2001.

The district at stake includes Glendale, Maspeth, Middle Village, Richmond Hill, Ridgewood and Woodhaven. The campaign there has spawned debate about overdevelopment, education and health care.

Robert Holden, president of the Juniper Park Civic Association , said the race that gives voters "a curious choice" between an experienced former councilmember and an incumbent who is "learning on the job" but has energy.

For either one, responding to local concerns will be a must, according to Holden.

"We have an attitude here. The elected officials work for us and not the other way around," he said. As to the two current contenders, Holden would not state a preference saying, "There's good about both of them."

Their Roads to City Hall

Despite the 34 years' difference in their ages, both candidates have extensive experience familiarity with politics. In addition to serving on the council, Ognibene, 65, worked as a private citizen to help shape City Council and also unsuccessfully challenged Michael Bloomberg for the GOP nomination for Michael Bloomberg in 2005.

Crowley, 31, follows a family tradition: Both of her parents served in neighboring City Council districts and her cousin, Joseph Crowley , is a U.S. representative from the 7th Congressional District in Queens and Queens County Democratic leader.

Still, Crowley has only been in office since January. In November 2008, she beat then-incumbent Republican Anthony Como, who had won the June 2008 non-partisan special election to fill the seat left vacant by the resignation of Councilmember Dennis Gallagher. Como had defeated both Crowley and Ognibene in the June election. Gallagher left the council in April 2008 after pleading guilty to two misdemeanor sexual abuse charges.

Last November's wave of new Democratic voters for the presidential election undoubtedly helped Crowley win victory and become the first Democrat and the first female to represent district 30.

Now Ognibene wants Republicans back in power.

"She benefited from the coattails effect," said Ognibene, referring to the flood of what he calls "Obama people."

The Voice of Queens?

Ognibene says this election is particularly significant because after the 2010 census City Council may have to redraw its districts. According to the New York City Charter, City Council cannot propose any redistricting that would disenfranchise communities defined by "historical, racial, economic, ethnic, religious or other" ties. It also says that redistricting cannot be used to split up a group of voters who belong to the same political party in order to diminish the influence of their votes.

"As long as I'm elected, they won't break it up," said Ognibene. If they did break up the district -- and divide its Republican voters "the people in our community will lose their voice," Ognibene said.

Crowley, though, counters that Ognibene would not be that voice. "He's not in touch with current issues and concerns," she said.

Where They Stand on What

Ognibene says his priorities are what he sees as over-taxation along with traffic and school construction. Crowley says that health care and education should be first on the list. Holden says all those issues are important, plus what he views as a lack of police officers and general overdevelopment.

Preservation, from beautification projects like parks and gardens to protecting historic buildings, is important in District 30, said the executive of the Historic Districts Council , Simeon Bankoff. Ridgewood, according to Bankoff, has some 2,800 buildings that are state landmarks, but no more than 250 of them have the city protections that would prevent anyone from altering them.

"A City Council member is a very pivotal part of that process," he said, especially if the mayoral administration is not responsive to preservationists' concerns.

Crowley sits on the City Council Landmark subcommittee and said she helped push through a downzoning
for Glendale, Maspeth and Middle Village that would restrict new development projects there. Finally approved in July, the rezoning had been stalled for the four years and was a high priority for the civic association that had spearheaded the project.

Critics, including Ognibene, argue that Crowley took credit for a project that was the result of many years of hard work by others.

Crowley disagrees. She said her actions have been vital to various projects, calling it a matter of “public record” and that statements to the contrary are “just not true.”

According to Bankoff, the work was not Ognibene’s either. "After his term in office, the area really required a lot of downzoning that hadn't happened,” Bankoff said. Part of this was because changes in the real estate market.

Spaces for Learning and Healing

Ognibene hopes to see more construction, particularly of primary schools, he said. He would like to see the creation of an advisory panel, which would include realtors, to locate available property for these buildings.

In April, Crowley opposed the construction of a high school in Maspeth because the Department of Education would not agree to give neighborhood students priority for admission to the school.

"Let me be clear. I want a school in Maspeth but I cannot agree with this plan,” City Council minutes show Crowley as saying. She cited "transit and traffic concerns raised by the community," and urged the Department of Education to “compromise” on the proposal.

The City Council approved the plans in a 37-to-10 vote and gave preference for some school districts, but not the ones Crowley represents.

There has been another major change in the district since Ognibene's years as councilmember: In the last year, three hospitals in Queens have closed . Now residents needing emergency care must go to Elmhurst , a public hospital notorious for its long waits.

Money and Backers

Crowley has received a number of endorsements, including the support of United Health Care Workers East 1199 SEIU, Uniformed Fire Officers Association and United Federation of

Teachers along with several politicians like New York State Attorney General Andrew Cuomo. Mayor Michael Bloomberg and former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani have endorsed Ognibene. The Republican candidate said he has not sought endorsements from "unions or organizations."

So far Crowley has raised $83,700 in private funds and another $75,696 in public funds. She has spent $108,158. Crowley received at least six private donations of the maximum $2,750; three of these contributors were related to labor unions, two were from individuals, and one came from the group Taxpayers for an Affordable New York .

Ognibene has $81,021 in private donations, paired with $84,122 in public funds and has spent $90,300. He received 10 donations of $2,750. Five of these were from real estate companies, two came from administers of a single hedge fund, and the other donation was from a private equity firm.