

College Student Seeks to Unseat Albany Insider

by Amanda Kersey

Friday, October 22, 2010 12:00 AM



Photo by [Anthony Catalano](#) An Italian street fair in the Bensonhurst. Both Assembly candidates have deep ties to the Italian community in the district, but the area is changing rapidly.

In the [49th state Assembly district](#) in southwest Brooklyn, the incumbent has held the seat longer than his opponent has been alive. The Democratic legislator, [Peter Abbate](#), 61, has served as the district's Assembly member since 1986. He faces a challenge from [Peter Cipriano](#), a 20-year-old conservative Republican.

While both candidates grew up in the district and have deep ties to the Italian community, far more than their age divides them. Unlike many this election year, Abbate leaves little doubt he is an Albany insider. Cipriano, who took time off from the College of Staten Island to campaign full time, presents himself as a reformer who would freeze property taxes, eliminate member items or "pork" and demand that future state budgets be balanced and delivered on time. He already has one election victory under his belt, having [defeated](#) businesswoman [Lucretia Regina-Potter](#) in the Republican primary.

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Abbate has received contributions from state labor unions and has [\\$599,924.91](#) to spend on the campaign, according to the state elections board. Cipriano has received most of his contributions from individuals and has [\\$2,174.21](#) in campaign funds available.

Insider vs. Outsider

Experience and the situation in Albany took center stage at an Oct. 12 debate between Abbate and Cipriano hosted by the [Dyker Heights Civic Association](#). Throughout the spirited discussion, attended by some 100 people, Abbate assailed Cipriano's political inexperience, while Cipriano denounced Abbate's allegiance to Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.

Abbate has said that his seniority in the Assembly had given him great influence and even allowed him to join the proverbial "three men in a room," who control much of state politics. In an interview, he said that one of those three men -- Silver -- had been a "great leader" who has become an easy target for the media and some of the public.

As to his many years in the capital, "I've got to be doing something right if the people vote for me," Abbate said in an interview.

For his part, Cipriano attributed the "dysfunction" of the legislature to lawmakers' numerous terms and acquisition of hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign funds.

Abbate stressed his work in the neighborhood, saying that he restored money for schools and seniors and attended numerous committee and community board meetings in the district. He criticized Cipriano for not showing up at these meetings. Cipriano said he had focused on talking to people in the district about their concerns.

School Savings

As chair of the Assembly [Committee on Governmental Employees](#), Abbate has long allied

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himself with unions. In 2008, he received more than half of campaign donations from the labor sector, which has been the largest contributor to his campaigns since at least 2000.

He sponsored a [bill](#) that would expand the rights of employees to seek legal remedy if their employers fail to follow labor law and supports lowering the retirement age for teachers to 55. He said early retirement would avoid layoffs and save the state money it now pays in salaries to high-earning senior teachers, although the state would have to pay pensions. As experienced, high-earning teachers leave, Abbate said, the school systems could hire young teachers at an entry-level salary.



Photo by Amanda Kersey Peter Cipriano

Cipriano has addressed education by calling for the state to provide vouchers to families who send their children to private schools, a proposal that would benefit many Catholic and Orthodox Jewish residents of the district. Cipriano, who likened public schools to penitentiaries, believes a voucher program would draw public school students to private schools and alleviate overcrowding in public schools. He estimated that vouchers for elementary school students would cost the state \$5,000 per elementary school student, while vouchers for high school students would cost \$10,000 per pupil.

According to the [New York State School Report Card](#), the New York City Department of Education spent \$19,075 in total expenditures per pupil during the 2007-2008 school year.

On the state's other major expenditure -- health care -- Cipriano opposes taxes on sugar and soda. He said it is not the state's job to regulate consumption. "It comes to a point where people feel it's a little ridiculous," he said. "When you're looking at the economic situation, the last thing you should be thinking to do is put an additional tax on people."

While money generated from sugar and soda taxes could help fund public health services, Cipriano said he doubted that the money would actually go to those programs.

Jobs and Businesses

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The district the two men seek to represent has changed. Italians once dominated the business district, but a growing Chinese population has set up bakeries, tailor shops and markets. The competition is vying for a dwindling market, though, according to small business owners. George Vellios, who has owned Dyker Heights Floral Events for 20 years, said operating a small business in the district is "really tough." "We're one of the sole survivors," he said. "A lot of businesses come and go."

Cipriano advocates creation of a small business council, made up of representatives from business sectors in the district, which would meet with him to discuss business-related issues.



Photo by Amanda Kersey Peter Abbate

Abbate's economic proposals focus on trying to create jobs in the state. He wants the state to build and improve infrastructure to create well-paying jobs. He believes workers then would buy appliances and other goods, which would benefit the manufacturing industry.

Unlike most of Democratic Assembly members, Abate voted against same-sex marriage and a [bill](#) that extends anti-discrimination laws to include transgender people. He did, though vote for a [bill](#) that would allow any two unmarried adults to adopt a child and [another](#) to amend New York divorce laws.

Have and Have Not

Defeating any incumbent legislator in New York is a difficult task, let alone beating an experienced candidate with roots in the district and deep pockets. The debate dramatized the huge gaps in the candidates' resource.

Abbate castigated Cipriano for not listing in his campaign contributions popcorn and cotton candy machines that someone had loaned Cipriano to use during his campaign kick-off party. "Shame on me," Cipriano said wryly in an interview after the debate.

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Abbate also criticized Cipriano for ordering campaign materials, such as leaflets and buttons, from outside the state. Cipriano said that because of a lack of money, he had to look for cheap alternatives to more expensive local materials. He looked forward, he said, to some day being able to spend more money in the community.