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The Public Ought to Know: Queens Civic Congress platform a useful tool

By Corey Bearak

The cliché goes that elections represent a clash of ideas. Maybe, maybe not. Let others rehash Nov. 2. I prefer to note a vote that took place a few weeks earlier in Queens.

A rather diverse group of people - some who might be very comfortable in those "red" states and some who might be called "blue staters" - agreed on a document that elected officials and aspirants for public office might find rather useful.



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The Queens Civic Congress 2004-2005 platform, available on the web at www.queensciviccongress.org, contains programmatic and legislative ideas that would probably work well as positions advanced by the people we vote into office and those who seek our vote.

The platform groups policies recommended by the civic congress under 16 categories: land use and zoning, illegal building and illegal conversion, community facilities, public safety, parks and recreation, education, economic development, culture, environment, health and hospitals, city governance, city budget/fiscal policy and four separate transportation topics - mass transit, vehicular transportation, aviation, and JFK and LaGuardia (airport) access.

At the outset, a word of praise for Richard Hellenbrecht, the Queens Civic Congress vice president who coordinated the review, update and ultimate adoption of this document. Rich, who also chairs Community Board 13, reflects the independent and dispassionate thinking of a group of civic-minded Queens residents who dedicate a lot of time to their neighborhoods.

In many ways, the Queens Civic Congress' platform reflects the collective wisdom of the experiences of civic activists. It reflects their work as advocates and, just as importantly, their professional engagements.

As an example, the second to last page of the document includes a proposal to "pass a 'Federal Brooks law' style Qualified Based Selection (QBS) professional contracting law barring bid fee cuts [Int. No. 301]." Queens Civic Congress Treasurer Jim Trent found this need while working in city government. A column last January noted how Jim first suggested the legislation to his then city Councilman Sheldon Leffler who introduced the legislation in his last term. The current council took up the legislation when Helen Sears introduced it - perhaps benefiting by hiring a chief of staff who was familiar with the bill from his prior government gig.

The platform makes no notion of ownership of the ideas therein. If a reader sees an idea in the platform appear somewhere else, it ought not to cause any concern. It should not surprise anyone that the folk who worked on the platform applied the ideas in their work.

There's no doubt that some platform precepts found their way into work I've done in government or for clients since. I've always recommended the platform (and its earlier versions) to elected officials, their aides and those newly elected.

The platform includes worthy policies in state legislation advanced by others, including several Queens legislators. Some notions on health care carried over from an earlier platform reflect direct suggestions from Assemblyman Bill Scarborough.

In other cases, legislators, to their credit, sponsored legislation to implement civic congress platform items. City Councilman David Weprin sponsors council bill Int. No. 230 to address the inability of Buildings Department inspectors to gain access to allegedly illegal residential units.

His Queens colleagues, Councilmembers Melinda Katz, James Gennaro and Leroy Comrie joined him on two bills. Int. No. 448 addresses building department fee revenues exceeding (the cost of) its programmatic plan examination and code inspection and enforcement functions. It would require the Commissioner of Buildings to provide an accounting of revenue

the agency collects and its expenditures every six months. Int. No. 449 would educate homeowners on compliance with the Building Code and Zoning Resolution.

If the amount of the expenditure is less than 90 percent of agency revenues, the commissioner shall either reduce fees or raise expenditures to match expenditures.

Int. No. 449, also sponsored by Councilman John Liu, would establish a program to educate and inform new and established homeowners of relevant building codes and zoning laws and fines for noncompliance. It would use the offices of council members and the borough presidents as resources for outreach.

The platform takes on tough issues. The city could address its budget problems by adopting the platform's real estate and income tax reforms that impose no burdens on middle and working class New Yorkers.

The Queens Civic Congress expects to formally present its new platform, in PDF (portable data file) format, to elected officials at its annual legislative reception in two weeks. Its availability on the web should make no one, especially those who hold or aspire (another) public office, shy about reviewing and adopting any of the legislative and policy proposals.

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