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The Public Ought to Know: Political candidates field various questions

By Corey Bearak
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When I began consulting, the plan was to focus on advising those in government office, labor and business groups and individuals about policy and related matters. My friend Kirby Lindell asked me to consider advising a council candidate he became friendly with through his own labor involvements. Kirby heads the Bell-Park Manor Terrace co-operative, which envelopes two sides of our alma mater, Martin Van Buren High School. He also organizes a high school reunion every five years. After a number of meetings, my colleagues and I agreed to advise the candidate.

As occurred in the last city election, it also offers an opportunity to look at and respond to many questionnaires. These can come from political parties, interest groups including those concerned about environmental, housing and parks issues, political clubs and others.

Some offer challenging questions on important matters of public policy like solid waste disposal. Others also pose questions relating to people's civil rights including health care for same sex couples. Still others practically read like contracts that require certain positions - answer "yes" or "no" or "no answer" (is that a "maybe," a "no" or "I don't know?").

Throughout the early stages of this year's campaign, some daily newspapers have compared positions of the citywide candidates. Expect community-oriented papers such as the TimesLedger to pose their own series of questions to candidates, including those running for city council.

There is talk in the civic community in Queens about preparing our own survey; it would focus on issues in our (Queens Civic Congress) platform

found at <http://www.queensciviccongress.org/platform/index.php> (Download the 2004-5 platform.). The civic community has real concerns about land use and zoning, illegal building and illegal conversion of housing, public safety, parks and recreation, schools, economic development, cultural programs, environment, health care and hospitals, fiscal and budget issues and taxes. On transportation, the civic community's concerns cover aviation, mass transit, access to our city's two airports and cars.

What questions might they pose?

- * Would you support the extension of the new protective R2A zoning developed for the Bayside zoning to other low-density residential areas in Queens?
- * Would you support legislation to empower the Department of Buildings to again access to houses suspected of including an extra apartment illegally?
- * Would you support a change in the definition of "major concessions" - that no longer excludes most concessions in parks from community review?
- * Would you support community input and review and legislative oversight of major residential, commercial, industrial and public developments, even where the city's Uniformed Land Use Review Procedure that guarantees such reviews is not specifically applicable?
- * Would you support funding borough-based offices to perform planning functions and zoning for the borough?
- * Would you support legislative review and oversight of Board of Standards and Appeals decisions to grant variances?
- * Would you support empowering the Department of Buildings to enforce deed restrictions limiting use, density, yards and architectural elements?
- * Would you support a true community policing program that engages the resources of concerned communities in a partnership with the NYPD to address crime and disorder, including quality of life problems, in each precinct?

* Would you support increasing Queens precinct staffing to Safe Street/Safe Cities levels and maintain those levels?

* Would you support keeping revenues by Parks properties within the Department of Parks and Recreation to help fund its programs, operations and projects?

* Would you oppose constructing a rowing regatta and a white water rafting center in Flushing Meadows Corona Park for Olympic events?

* Would you support subjecting use of city parks for 2012 Olympic events to City Charter community review process?

* Would you support fiscal equity for subway riders relative to suburban commuter lines to correct the billion dollar inequity in fare subsidies applied to out-of-towners?

Some questionnaires seek more than affirmative answers; they seek thoughtful answers:

After "penning" an op-ed for Newsday on the Cross Harbor Tunnel, I'd welcome answers to this question: To reduce the adverse impacts of truck freight to and through the city, what measures do you advocate you make to advance freight rail?

And to honor the release of the city budget, which uses a surplus realized this fiscal year to balance a mix of new programs and revenue reduction next year: Explain the budget, fiscal and revenue reforms you support to address the city's long-term structural budget imbalance, including the several billion budget deficit forecast for fiscal year 2007 that begins six months after the new year?

Corey Bearak is an attorney and adviser on government, community and public affairs. He is also active in Queens civic and political circles. He can be reached via e-mail at [Bearak@aol.com](mailto: Bearak@aol.com). Visit his web site at CoreyBearak.com.