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**The Horses Line Up For The Political Starting Gate - Queens Tribune (NY) - March 19, 2009 - page 1**
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It's beginning to take shape.

Although things could change, the cost of running Citywide prevents anyone but a billionaire or near billionaire from jumping into the fray last minute.

Therefore, if you're looking at Mayor, Public Advocate or Comptroller, we all probably know the names of the players by now - at least we thought we did until last week.

But people can drop out; they can't drop in.

Many have started long ago and have been running or playing in politics much of their adult life - you'll recognize the names. Others are young and aggressive and are jumping into the major leagues quickly. Then there is Mike Bloomberg who has the resources to make his own rules - standard political paradigms do not apply if you need not raise money and have an unlimited amount to spend.

Whether it is your own money, raised bucks or matching funds, money has become the most significant factor in winning elections in our country today. That is indeed a sad commentary on a political system that just a generation ago selected its candidates largely on the issues and not how high-priced consultants marketed the package. While money certainly mattered in the elections of Ed Koch and John Kennedy, they were not the high rollers in their first foray for their lofty offices. Without checking the records, I'm fairly certain Nixon spent far more than JFK did. And, although I'm just guessing, money was not to the advantage of the victorious Koch who in 1977 beat incumbent Mayor Abe Beame and Mario Cuomo, among others.

But damn it, today money matters. So if you're a serious candidate, raise your bucks.

Mike Bloomberg doesn't have to. Anthony Weiner and Bill Thompson got out early enough whereby they both will max out for matching funds but will still be dozens of millions behind the Mayor in money power. Now Weiner has taken a sabbatical. It was Weiner, who just four months ago, stopped by our office and analyzed the Mayoral race. He declared that the Mayor's money advantage would to some degree be neutralized until after the September Primary between him and comptroller Bill Thompson. Then, in the less than two months that remain, the Democratic candidate would be able to effectively compete financially with saturation media buys.

But it was clear that the money advantage that Weiner was looking at was the threatened negative campaign and that likely contributed to his current status being on "campaign sabbatical." Although he retains his options, he does leave the door wide open for Bill Thompson to gather support, raise money for the General and become the City's No. 1 Democrat. The Primary for Mayor against Queens Councilman Tony Avella, if it materializes, may enable Thompson to begin the campaign early, establish his rationale and build name recognition. Unless he stumbles badly, Weiner will not have much time to re-launch.

Today, it looks like Thompson against Bloomberg and New York City will be in good hands no matter the outcome.

The other races got similar jolts when Queens Councilman John Liu declared his candidacy for Comptroller. Previously, Liu was a player in the Public Advocate race, which likewise now has a new complexion. As a result of campaign matching funds, all the (major) candidates in both races will have about the same amount of money to spend.

Democratic Councilman Liu joins three fellow Council members in the Comptroller race: Queens' Melinda Katz and David Weprin along with Brooklyn's David Yassky. This four-way dance - if it turns out to be that - pits four competent candidates with solid backgrounds against each other. None of the candidates have citywide name recognition, and with equal money, natural constituencies and effective campaigns can make a difference in the race. Like the Mayoral primary, if no candidate in a citywide race gets 40 percent of the vote,

the top two meet in a runoff. With four in the race and no clear frontrunner, that is likely.

Liu, looking to become the first Asian American citywide elected official, is positioning himself as the minority candidate. He has hired the consulting firm of Dinkins Deputy Mayor Bill Lynch, and moving out of the Public Advocate race has cleared the path for Brooklyn councilman Bill DiBlasio to try to achieve the same thing there. Expect the Working Families Party to play a significant role for Liu and DiBlasio.

With three Jewish Council members in the race against Liu, it very well could come down to which one will face Liu in the runoff. Katz, the only woman, and Yassky, the only not from Queens, would suggest that the candidacy of David Weprin may be seriously challenged. Furthermore, like Weprin, Liu and Katz are both Democratic District Leaders and that may neutralize the Queens County organization once believed to be in Weprin's corner. The Liu candidacy hurt him the most.

Former Public Advocate Green is the 1,000-pound gorilla in that race. His name recognition and family wealth makes him a frontrunner and likely the man to beat (or lose to) in the runoff. Underfunded former NYCLU and Public Advocate candidate Norman Siegel took the biggest blow when Green entered the race expecting to recapture the support of the Manhattan Liberal establishment. Queens Councilman Eric Gioia, although young, had a stint in the Clinton White House and probably has the most technologically sophisticated operation. Brooklyn Councilman Bill DiBlasio rounds out the field and will likely battle Gioia for the right to face off against Mark Green. At this point in time, it is always possible that Green, a perennial candidate who has yet to begin campaign activity, may not follow through in this race.

Finally, a young newcomer to the game, David Kerpen, is gearing up to run for Queens Borough President. He, like others, has been carefully noting that incumbent Helen Marshall has not filed for or begun her campaign, while Assemblywoman Audrey Pheffer, who was a candidate before the self serving term limit change, still acts likes a candidate. The Queens County organization has previously switched candidates after petition filing; a young unknown like Kerpen won't prevent them from doing it again.

The fun is beginning.

Stay tuned.

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Weiner Defers Commitment, But Don't Write Him Off

By HENRY STERN

Congressman Anthony Weiner's sidestep on the mayoral race does not in any way signify that he has laid his political ambitions to rest.

We see his letter to friends and supporters as an adroit maneuver by the Congressman to give himself more freedom of action, to make him appear less ambitious for higher office, and to distance himself from other politicians who are committed to running. Since the Democratic primary will be held on Sept. 15, it will be easier for him to decide whether or not to run in May or June. This would lighten the burden of constant campaigning in New York, while the House of Representatives, the body to which he has been elected five times, is in session in Washington.

Timing means a great deal in politics, and if the public tires of a race between an overqualified and over-resourced mayor and undistinguished challengers, there may well be a desire for another candidate to appear. The pause in Weiner's campaign, if, in fact, there really is one, may give him a sense of freshness for the final lap leading to the primary Sept. 15 and the election Nov. 3.

Weiner is a young and talented public servant who was first elected to the Council in 1991, when he was 27. Prior to that, he had served on the staff of his mentor, Chuck Schumer, who was then a Congressman. He defeated three rivals to win the Democratic nomination for Congress in 1998, and is now serving his 11th year in the House.

John Lindsay was a Congressman for seven years before he was elected mayor. Ed Koch was a Congressman

for nine before he was elected mayor. Weiner ran in 2005 and exceeded expectations. He wisely dropped out at the right moment, leaving it to Freddie Ferrer to be crushed by Bloomberg. Weiner has raised $6.6 million, the max, for the 2009 mayoral race.

The big difference between this year and the past is that Lindsay and Koch were running against Abe Beame and others, while Weiner would run against Mike Bloomberg. That is a significantly different undertaking, for millions of reasons.

Conventional wisdom is that the election is Bloomberg's to lose. It is difficult for a split party to come together after a divisive primary, especially if race is a factor. The mayor has bought many talented Democratic consultants, and it was in his interest if only to keep them out of the contest. The downside for the mayor is voter fatigue. Every show on Broadway, even the greatest hits, has an opening and closing night. The only questions are when the Bloomberg show will close, and which show will succeed it.

It is also important to maintain an attitude of deference to the voters. Whatever they may be individually, collectively they are your master.

The City Council has over-ruled the voters on amending the Charter, and the Councilmembers may win re-election in the absence of effective competition in their gerrymandered districts. They have not, however, served the greater public interest, and they have not enhanced the popularity of city-wide officials' who can be held accountable by the public.

One cannot close without commenting that Mayor Bloomberg's first two terms have been unusually good.

Mayors Lindsay, Koch and Giuliani raised the bar over the years, and Mayor Bloomberg has built on their achievements. We always want to do better, but we should know that we could do a lot worse, as we did in ages past when the city was politically controlled by the Democratic machine.

This is a year for New Yorkers to pay attention to the political process, and to make their own decisions as to whom to support. Last year, we chose leaders for our country; this year it is the city's turn. This is a great metropolis, and we do not want it to enter the dismal swamp of New York state government.

In September and November, you will decide.

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