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Questions Surround Election

In wake of disaster, politics a low priority

By Jessica Kowal
STAFF WRITER

Tuesday's rescheduled primary election is a wild card because of vast uncertainty among candidates over how many people will vote.

Particularly for the four major Democratic candidates for mayor, who spent years building alliances with interest groups and unions to guarantee blocs of votes, the World Trade Center attacks made past plans irrelevant.

Focused and energized before Sept. 11, several unions are now dealing with the graver issues of life, death and unemployment. Some of the biggest labor players, unsure about members' tolerance for politics, haven't made basic decisions about Primary Day volunteers, telephone calls or even whether to send literature.

"It's basically going to be a very short and quick effort [to say] you should vote," said Ed Ott, director of public policy for the New York City Central Labor Council.

Some city leaders and unions, however, hope to convince citizens to send a message that terrorism will not derail democracy.

New Yorkers must "demonstrate our faith in our system . . . by turning out in huge numbers to vote," said former Mayor David Dinkins, who has endorsed Public Advocate Mark Green.

For several unions, the election is irrelevant compared to rescue and recovery efforts in lower Manhattan. Firefighters, police, EMTs, carpenters, ironworkers and other trades workers have labored for more than a week and will have little time or desire to focus on voting, Ott said.



Politics is not a priority for the Uniformed Firefighters Association, which endorsed Council Speaker Peter Vallone. The union is dealing with the loss of well over 300 firefighters, rescue efforts, and fire protection across the city, said Tom Butler, a union spokesman.

"We've all got our hands full at this time," Butler said.

The United Federation of Teachers, which endorsed city Comptroller Alan Hevesi, suspended all political efforts on Sept. 11 and hasn't decided what to do next, a union official said.

"It's the last thing that people are thinking about right now," the official said, adding that several teachers' spouses are missing in the wreckage.

But some unions are moving ahead. The health care union, Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union, which supports Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, was criticized by some labor leaders for making telephone calls as early as Monday. "A lot of people just weren't ready to hear it," a labor official said.

Nonetheless, Local 1199, which lost at least three members in the towers' collapse, is contacting people who volunteered on Sept. 11 to ask if they'll return next Tuesday.

"We want people to know there is a new election," said Jennifer Cunningham, executive director of SEIU's New York State Council.

SEIU Local 32BJ still wants to help Green, despite losing 26 members who were janitors, window washers, maintenance workers and security guards at the World Trade Center. The disaster also eliminated 2,000 of the local's jobs in the downtown area.

"We plan to do whatever we can, under the circumstances," said spokesman Bill Meyerson.

Some unions have logistical problems. The largest municipal union, District Council 37, which supports Vallone, is locked out of its downtown office.

But another Vallone supporter, the Correction Officers Benevolent Association, is not holding back.

"We definitely have the energy to get out and vote," said union President Norman Seabrook. He was criticized for putting up new posters to support Vallone, but insisted these posters were hanging on Sept. 11.



Newsday Photo / Alan Raia

Above, election observer Meghann Donahue was at a Queens polling place early on Sept. 11, but in the wake of the attacks on the Twin Towers, polls were closed. Now unions and other advocates are again seeking to get out the vote on Tuesday.

Ill-Prepared for Primary

Board of Elections faces daunting challenges as vote nears

By Stephanie Saul
STAFF WRITER

With its central office powered by generator and its computer systems apt to crash at any moment, the city Board of Elections hobbled yesterday toward Tuesday's primary while admitting it is ill-prepared.

The election, with its large field of candidates for city office and potentially close contests, was considered a challenge for the beleaguered agency even before terrorists struck the World Trade Center and the Sept. 11 primary was aborted.

Now, the challenge has become even greater. Voters have been evacuated from their homes, damaged polling sites have to be relocated, and the board's central office — only six blocks from the Trade Center site — has unreliable telephone service and power.

"We are not ready," board member Terrence O'Connor, a Queens Democrat, said yesterday during an agency meeting to assess plans for Tuesday's election. Yet, O'Connor and other commissioners vowed that the vote will go forward.

"The governor gave us this mandate to have this election Sept. 25," he said.

A court order could delay the election; a hearing is scheduled for today in federal court in Brooklyn on a lawsuit filed by five voters and eight Council candidates who argue that New Yorkers need more time before they can properly exercise their right to vote. One of the plaintiffs is Kwong Hui, a candidate for Council from lower Manhattan, where many voters remain evacuated from their homes.

Among the problems the city faces:

- With computers hampered and agency workers already overloaded, the usual notices to voters and poll workers will not be sent. Only voters in lower Manhattan will receive mailings, in some cases telling them their poll sites have been moved and that they are eligible, under emergency law, to vote by absentee ballot. For others, the board is relying on newspaper ads and media coverage. "I don't know whether people are going to show up," the board's deputy director, Joseph Gentili told the commissioners emphatically. "I don't know!"
- Voting machines might not be ready for the primary, a run-off and the general election, according to the agency's chief voting machine technician, Gary Berzansky. Noting that he is short 17 technicians, or 25 percent of his staff, Berzansky urged that paper ballots be used for any run-off. The idea was rejected, however, leaving it unclear whether Berzansky will be able to get the machines ready.
- Complete election results might not be available to the media Tuesday night because phone lines are down, Police Lt. Kenneth Gableman told the commissioners.

Following the meeting, Gene Russianoff of the New York Public Interest Research Group said it was apparent the agency is having a "tough time."

"It was daunting before this disaster, and sitting in an un-air-conditioned office with no computer system, you've got to have sympathy for them," Russianoff said. "The biggest problem I see is the 30,000 poll workers and what their show rates are going to be."

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