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New focus emerges in mayor race

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The World Trade Center tragedy has thrust urgent new problems to the top of New York's "to do" list — and rewritten the job description of the next mayor.

But with just days until the rescheduled primary Sept. 25, the candidates and their campaigns are virtually powerless to respond.

"The whole world has changed. Everything these guys said was a priority isn't anymore," said one campaign adviser, who asked to remain anonymous. "And right now, you can't do anything about it. There's no campaign."

Until Tuesday morning, when the terrorist attacks forced a judge to halt the primary four hours after voting began, the race to succeed Mayor Giuliani was being waged over a narrow set of issues.

Candidates spent the year battling over who could best reform the schools and unify a diverse city. They dueled over who could keep up the successful war on crime, yet bridge the divide between communities of color and the police.

But such issues have been overshadowed by matters such as how to rebuild the Financial District and keep businesses from fleeing. And the need for the next mayor to be a strong leader and crisis manager suddenly seems more important, especially as Giuliani's hands-on presence during the tragedy has drawn plaudits.

It's as if the mayoral candidates have been reading from the same road map to reach the same destination — only to find the place they must get to has been moved far, far away.

"I think we have a different city on our hands," said Steven Cohen, vice dean of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

"The next mayor has to rebuild the infrastructure of the city and rebuild the psyche of the city," he said. "It's not to say these candidates couldn't do it. It's just not the issues they have been focusing on."

Yet the candidates agreed to an indefinite moratorium on electioneering after the terrorist attacks.

The Campaign Finance Board virtually made the ban official, ruling that candidates who receive public subsidies cannot spend any more money in the primary except for get-out-the-vote operations Sept. 25.

The only candidate not taking public money, Republican billionaire Michael Bloomberg, has said he won't air ads, either.

Not that they could launch commercials anyway.

"Even if I wanted to put up an ad, the stations are not running them," said the campaign adviser, "and I'm not sure who would pay attention. Next week we're going to have the funerals . . . and what happens if the U.S. [retaliates]?"

Democrat Peter Vallone has been highly visible during the crisis in his capacity as City Council speaker. He practically has been glued to Giuliani's side in recent days, making him a familiar presence to anyone watching events on TV.

The other candidates don't have roles that lend themselves to such exposure.

So voters will be forced to make a choice based on ideas, images and impressions presented by candidates who had sought to be one kind of mayor when the times now demand another kind of leader in City Hall.

"To have an election where the most important issue isn't even discussed, it doesn't seem plausible," said Cohen.

David Birdsell, professor of public affairs at Baruch College, said, "People are going to have to take what they saw in the debates, what they saw in the ads, what they read, and match that to the job description of a crisis mayor.

"That is a very different campaign than the one that anyone even hinted at over the summer.

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