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Mayoral hopefuls shift gears in light of terrorism

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The major mayoral candidates acknowledged yesterday that the priorities they campaigned on all year — from education to housing — must take a backseat to the urgent new problems caused by the terrorist attack.

"The issue now is security and rebuilding the financial center," said Democrat Alan Hevesi.

Making their first major appearances since the collapse of the twin towers, the candidates backed new tax incentives to keep companies from fleeing and tough security measures — from surveillance cameras to inspections of identity cards — that could change the way New Yorkers live.

All six said they would be open to having Mayor Giuliani — who is expected to announce his intentions today to try to stay in office — play some role in the rebuilding.

But they offered no specifics for making up the staggering revenue loss the crisis is causing the city. Most ruled out raising taxes.

Democrat Mark Green said he was hopeful Washington and Albany would help: The terrorists "attacked New York because we represent America. All of America has to help us."

Nor did they specify which of their campaign proposals would fall victim to the city's new agenda. "We are going to make slower progress on them, that's for sure," said Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer.

When pressed, they conceded that pay hikes for city workers may have to be reduced. "There have to be adjustments," Democrat Peter Vallone, the City Council speaker, said, referring to teachers.

The candidates spoke during separate forums on Channels 2, 4 and 7, two days before tomorrow's rescheduled primary.

They had been out of sight since the terror attack on Primary Day. The primary was postponed, and the candidates didn't resume campaigning until this weekend.

Yesterday, they called rebuilding the Financial District and the economy a top priority. Hevesi, Green and Republican Herman Badillo also proposed tighter security.

"No one should have an expectation of privacy in airports, or in arenas or in large squares of the city. We have to dramatically increase surveillance" with cameras, Hevesi said. Cops should be more aggressive in demanding identification, he added.

"We have to rethink, if not rebalance, that close boundary between security and freedom," said Green, a flag pin on his lapel. New York, he said, should be modeled after Jerusalem and London, cities that tightened security after terrorism.

"Those cities have security checkpoints, bags being inspected, surveillance cameras in public places."

Vallone said security can be looser than in Israel, where people are "walking around with bombs wrapped around them." Still, he proposed new controls at the city's "points of entry."

Said Badillo, "There will have to be inconveniences, to put it gently."

All six favored erecting new office buildings on the World Trade Center site, but no one endorsed rebuilding the two 110-story behemoths.

Only Ferrer left the door open to hiking taxes, saying: "We are going to have to look at reform of some tax abatement programs."

The candidates adapted their year-long arguments to the context of the current crisis.

"I've faced some of these problems . . . on a different scale," Ferrer said. When "I walked into my office as borough president . . . we were in the Bronx surrounded by rubble."

"I've set goals, made tough decisions, met deadlines and delivered on promises," Republican mayoral hopeful Michael Bloomberg said. "Those are the qualities it will take to conquer the challenges facing us now."

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