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Freddy's South Bronx tale

Claims that he led rebirth overblown, say Koch & others

By DAVE SALTONSTALL
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

As Fernando Ferrer tries to steer his way to City Hall, his favorite road runs through the South Bronx — the one-time symbol of urban blight that he likes to claim credit for rebuilding as borough president.

The latest example came Tuesday night, when he told a room full of cheering supporters, "Atop the rubble, we were able to build new homes, new businesses, new jobs and, most importantly, new hope."

It's a message with mounting resonance, given that the next mayor will have the massive task of rebuilding terror-ravaged lower Manhattan — a connection Ferrer is not afraid to make.

"There is nothing compared to the devastation of two weeks ago," he said. "But I think I know what it takes to bring communities back."

But many veterans of the South Bronx say the story of that area's rebirth is considerably more complicated than Ferrer often makes out. And while Ferrer was a genuine force in that renaissance — which has included 66,000 new housing units in the last 14 years — he was more cheerleader than quarterback, with little real power beyond his ability to push and prod.

"He was constructive," said former Mayor Ed Koch. "But it would not be accurate to say that he was responsible for all those units of housing."

Much more important, say community leaders, was Koch himself, who in 1986 set aside a hefty $5 billion as part of a 10-year plan to add some 250,000 units to the city's aging housing stock.

Also key were the many community groups that did the real work when it came to carving out a piece of the Bronx's war-torn streets and breathing new life into the area.

"He was not the Robert Moses of the South Bronx," said Harold DiRienzo, founder of the Banana Kelley Improvement Association, in comparing Ferrer to the powerful public works czar of another era. "But he was part of the formula that made it work."

If Ferrer had a talent, said Koch, it was in seeking out available pots of government money — and knowing how to ask for sizable chunks.

"The reason we concentrated funds on the South Bronx was that Freddy was cooperative, unlike Harlem's leaders, who demanded the right to pick contractors and other patronage jobs," said Koch, who is neutral so far in Ferrer's mayoral runoff with Mark Green.

"All Freddy said was, 'Can I suggest where the priorities should be?' " Koch added. "And we said, 'Yes, you are the borough president.' "

Not that he could have done much more as borough president, especially after charter revisions in 1990 stripped the office of almost all real power. Since then, borough presidents have had virtually no control over land use or contracts, and Ferrer's annual capital budget barely tops $20 million.

Sharing credit

When asked directly yesterday about his role in reshaping the South Bronx, Ferrer was happy to spread credit — as he always has, he insisted.

"I never said I did this alone," Ferrer said. "I said we had to bring people together, and we did. And I have repeatedly given credit for the housing plan and the money to the one guy who had the vision and courage to do it — and that was Ed Koch.

"But did I play a role in this?" he added. "You bet I did. First of all, we developed a plan and priorities, well before any other borough did, and then we reached deep in the community to bring people together."

Still, some Bronx leaders remain frustrated by the shiny veneer that Ferrer and his supporters seem to lay atop the South Bronx while stumping across the city.

Such rhetoric, critics charge, creates the impression that all is well in that area, which is still home to some of the city's worst schools and the nation's highest asthma rates.

"In terms of attracting business to the Bronx and building office space, in terms of improving our school, there is so much that is undone," said Assemblyman Jeff Dinowitz (D-Bronx), a Green supporter. "So we should not delude ourselves into thinking that we have even come close to finishing the job."

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