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Dems face off in public advocate race

By FRANK LOMBARDI
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

A week from today, either Betsy Gotbaum, considered the consummate insider, or Norman Siegel, the ultimate outsider, will gain the city post that is next in line of succession to the mayor.

Because of only token opposition in November, winning the Democratic runoff will be tantamount to winning election to the $150,000-a-year job of public advocate.

Gotbaum, 63, served as parks commissioner under former Mayor David Dinkins and had lesser posts under mayors John Lindsay and Abe Beame.

She also spent several years as an investment banker in the mid-1980s, served briefly as the director of the Police Foundation, and for the past seven years was president of the New York Historical Society. She left the post in April to make her first bid for elective office.

The daughter of a well-to-do advertising executive, Gotbaum, whose maiden name was Flower, grew up in Manhattan and graduated from Georgetown University and the Columbia University Teacher's College.



Betsy Gotbaum

Adding to her insider credentials is her 25-year marriage to Victor Gotbaum, who retired in 1987 as the head of District Council 37, the city's largest municipal union. The Gotbaums have a vast array of influential friends, from financiers to elected officials.

Victor Gotbaum also has some enemies, including the current leaders of DC 37, who are backing Siegel, according to Siegel and a DC 37 spokesman.



Norman Siegel

Siegel, 57, has been a civil liberties lawyer for more than 30 years, including a stint in the South defending civil rights protesters. He served as executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union from 1985 until last February, when he began his first campaign for office.

In his former post, Siegel was a vehement critic of Mayor Giuliani and his policies, as well as a frequent litigant against the administration — from defending KKK members in their battle to wear hoods at rallies to representing whistleblowing police officers.

Siegel grew up in Brooklyn, the son of a linotype operator and shop foreman for a typographical union local. He went to public high school and graduated from Brooklyn College and New York University Law School.

Elections officials have unofficially declared Gotbaum, with 24.4% of the ballots, and Siegel, with 16.5%, the top two vote-getters in their seven-candidate primary.

The candidates will conduct the first of two debates at 7 tonight on New York 1.

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