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Dems Banding Together to Revive Party

By Jordan Rau
ALBANY BUREAU CHIEF

Still smarting from its unexpected loss in the New York City mayor's race, the state Democratic Party regrouped yesterday as both old and new leaders admonished themselves to avoid any debacles in next year's statewide races.

"We ought to have won," said outgoing party chairwoman Judith Hope, the former East Hampton supervisor who had led the party since 1995. "We had everything going for us. But the one thing we in politics ought to know is the unthinkable is always possible."

In a first, if mostly symbolic, show of harmony, party leaders from around the state unanimously lauded Hope for a string of victories over the years and elected as her successor Assemb. Herman Farrell Jr., the Manhattan Democratic leader and the first black to head the party.

Farrell, known as Denny, mocked the Republicans' victory in City Hall last month as possible only because their candidate, Michael Bloomberg, was "a recycled Democrat" and because the GOP's members were so homogeneous that "they can't find an ethnic to fight with" — unlike the city Democrats, who ended the mayoral primary bitterly splintered along racial lines.

While state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer urged Democrats to "be cohesive, speak with one voice and with passion," Spitzer's office is the only one where a Democratic primary appears unlikely next year.

There are already five Democrats vying for the party's nomination for the often-ridiculed post of lieutenant governor, and at least three campaigning for the nomination to succeed H. Carl McCall as state comptroller.

At the top of the ticket, McCall and Andrew Cuomo, the former federal housing secretary, are both aggressively seeking the nomination to challenge Gov. George Pataki, and that race — which like the mayoral runoff will pit a black candidate against a white candidate — has brought the most trepidation to many Democratic organizers.

Roberto Ramirez, the Bronx Democratic leader, who supported unsuccessful candidate Fernando Ferrer in the primary against Mark Green, said the state party has yet to repair the racial wounds opened in the city mayoral race and is now facing "an amazing challenge."

"I think Denny Farrell has his hands full, but I think that it is not just Denny Farrell's problem. It's the Democratic Party's problem," Ramirez said.

"I am incredibly concerned, constantly worried about the fact that we have not dealt with the issue," come up with a framework so that it doesn't happen again, and as long as the Democratic Party doesn't do this we will continue to lose elections."

Still, the Democrats have reason for some optimism should they survive their own process of selecting candidates. Unlike in 1998, the last round of races for top state offices, both of New York's U.S. senators are Democrats. New York State still has a 5-3 Democratic enrollment edge, and the party now controls the top elected positions in two key suburban counties, Nassau and Westchester.

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cobs. "We will be dismantling the Republican patronage machine" that the GOP historically relied on fo decades of victories in local races, he said.

Suffolk Democratic chairman Richard Schaffe said that while Pataki is now polling strong, the fall out of the state's financial problems next year woul make his re-election effort much harder. "We haven been hit as hard as in the city or upstate, but whe the tax bills hit, that's when things are going t change," he said. "There's going to be a lot of opportu nity to show how leaderless the state has been."

Andrew Metz of the Albany Bureau contributed t

On Losing the New York City Mayoral Race



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On Democrats Now In Power In Nassau County



'Republicans are going to lose a tremendous asset. We will be dismantling the Republican patronage machine . . .'

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On Gov. George Pataki's Re-Election Chances



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