

Three's a Crowd (but a Small One) On the Local Election Front

By JONATHAN P. HICKS

In a small office a few blocks from Times Square, Carlos Manzano is busy planning his political future. Mr. Manzano, a former city administrator who is active in Democratic Party politics, spends much of his time engaged in a full-throttle effort to be the next borough president of Manhattan. He goes to any forum that offers even a remote opportunity to meet voters, and he is raising money and promoting his campaign by mail and over the Internet.

Mr. Manzano is hardly alone in his passion for the borough presidency.

A city councilman from Harlem, Philip Reed, has also made clear his plans to enter the race. Two of his colleagues on the Council — Bill Perkins and Margarita López — have also made no secret of their designs on the office. Also interested are Adriano Espaillat, Scott Stringer and Keith L. T. Wright, all members of the State Assembly.

At the same time that those politicians — and there could be more — are planning and developing strategy for the borough president's race, another large group of aspirants is planning strategies to fill soon-to-bevacant council seats. In central Harlem, for example, there are at least a half-dozen people who are in various stages of planning campaigns for the seat currently held by Mr. Perkins. And in East Harlem, an equal number are eyeing Mr. Reed's seat. Neither

of them can run for their council seats next year. The Brooklyn district attorney's race in 2005 is also already attracting a large field of candidates.

It was once a bedrock axiom of New York politics that it took death or, even rarer, a fluke defeat, for elective offices to turn over. But these days, New Yorkers would be hard-pressed to complain about a lack of competition in politics. The crowded political contests in Harlem are being replicated throughout the city, with scores of politicians running in local races. A similarly large group is gathering to run in the next statewide races, which will not take place until 2006.

The political culture in the city has undergone a radical transformation in recent years. The city's term-limits laws, which went into effect three years ago, have reshaped the political landscape, with more and more offices opening up and more and more people running for them.

For New York's voters, it is clearly a new era, characterized by the prospect of seeing more candidates campaigning at subway stations and more pamphlets and fliers being stuffed into mailboxes. For the city government, it means that more money will be spent on the public campaign finance program, which matches most contributions up

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Reprinted From
The New York Times
Metro Section
Monday, April 5, 2004

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to \$250 by a four-to-one ratio.

"In the same way that meteorologists point to El Niño for the changes in weather patterns, term limits are at the root of political changes in this city," said Evan Stavisky, a partner in the Parkside Group, a political consulting firm.

"What happened with term limits in 2001 caused a tremendous reinvigoration of the political landscape," Mr. Stavisky said. "And what we're in now, in 2004, is really the calm before the political storms of 2005 and 2006."

They promise to be intensely active. In 2005 alone, term limits will end the tenures of the Manhattan borough president and several council members in Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Staten Island. Crowded, vigorous races are expected for each of those seats. And those who are uprooted by term limits are also looking for new places to land, making it likely that some incumbents seen as vulnerable could face hotly contested races, too.

Suddenly, the intentions of incumbents are being closely scrutinized. Many — including Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrión Jr. and City Councilwoman Eva S. Moskowitz — are waiting to see if William C. Thompson, the city comptroller, will run for re-election or make a run for mayor. Ms. Moskowitz said she would run for Manhattan borough president, not comptroller, if Mr. Thompson decided against running for mayor. And the positions held by both Mr. Carrión and Ms. Moskowitz, if vacated, would surely be hotly contested, too.

Also, the seat now held by Gifford Miller, the council speaker, is likely to attract several candidates. Mr. Miller, who cannot run for re-election, is planning to run for mayor next year. With the prospect that Attorney General Eliot Spitzer might run for governor, a handful of candidates have already declared interest in running for his seat in 2006. And at least three names besides his are being discussed to run for governor that year — including Gov. George E. Pataki's.

Basil Smikle, a former political aide who recently started a political consulting firm, said term limits have caused many elected officials to begin plotting their next step up the political ladder from the day they take office.

"We have gone into something of a



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Carlos Manzano is running for Manhattan borough president.

perpetual state of candidacy," Mr. Smikle said. "It has caused more people to think more seriously and quickly about what their next step will be."

The effects can be a good thing, Mr. Smikle said.

"With more candidates, there is a greater energy to races and a likelihood of greater turnout," he said. "And with that being the case, there is also the real possibility that more people will register to vote. Many candidates will see their margin of victory coming from newly registered voters."

As some are already seeing it, jumping into races — even crowded ones — cannot hurt. With the run will come the opportunity to put their names before voters, giving them a boost in the next race.

"There are people who realize that there is no longevity to incumbency," said Virginia Montague, a former aide to the Manhattan borough president, C. Virginia Fields and one of seven potential candidates for the council seat now held by Mr. Perkins.

"People understand, in this term-limits environment, that if they are young enough and skillful enough, they can run now, and be seen as someone with a real shot at winning four or eight years down the line," said Ms. Montague, who ran against an incumbent Councilman Perkins in 2003. "And that contributes to the free-for-all atmosphere."

While the prospect of a new political culture of crowded races is being

hailed by many as a sign of a thriving democracy, there are nonetheless concerns in some quarters. The New York City Board of Elections has been instructing its employees on how to deal with the prospect of avalanches of paperwork from candidates seeking to qualify for the ballot. Officials are also making sure that the new electronic voting machines being unveiled in some boroughs will be able to accommodate crowded fields.

"We realize that we now have to regularly prepare for a very crowded ballot," said John Ravitz, the executive director of the Board of Elections.

The city's Campaign Finance Board, too, is anticipating the impact. The board, which matches most contributions of \$250 or less with public funds by a ratio of four to one, has so far paid out \$5 million to candidates in the 2003 races, with another \$5 million set aside for additional payments.

Molly Watkins, a spokeswoman for the board, said it had not begun to make projections about the 2005 races. But she said that "it's safe to assume that much more than that will be spent" that year.

Meanwhile, the board has been looking at ways to cut down on the cost of publicly financed campaigns.

"The board does have some concerns that, perhaps, there was too much money out there," she said. "There were neighborhoods that were papered with literature, and people received multiple mailings from candidates."

She added that the board had made some recommendations on the spending limits and the maximum amount of public funds a candidate can receive. But the Council has not acted on those recommendations so far. Meanwhile, the Council is looking at a plan to increase the matching fund ratio to eight to one in some cases, further driving up the program's costs.

For the potential candidates, all of these concerns are beside the point.

"Competitive primaries with lots of candidates are healthy," said Mr. Manzano, the Manhattan borough president candidate. "Before, there would be few openings and little competition. But this environment brings new candidates and new ideas to the attention of the public. And each of the candidates has to present something exciting and different to the voters. It's a good thing."