

Lawrence mayoral race draws field of 10

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By John Laidler, Globe Correspondent | August 16, 2009

Who should lead the city over the next four years has become a central question in Lawrence as 10 candidates are battling to succeed incumbent two-term mayor Michael J. Sullivan.

Sullivan is prohibited from running again by a city term-limits rule. A Sept. 22 preliminary will cull the field to two for the Nov. 3 city election.

The size of the field, the open seat, and the prospect that Lawrence could become the first Massachusetts community to elect a Latino mayor are all drawing a spotlight to the race. Six of the contenders are Latino, and for the first time in a city election in Lawrence, Latinos will make up a majority of voters - 57.4 percent.

Also fueling interest is the strength of the field, which includes a state legislator, seven current or former city councilors, a Marine Corps veteran of the Iraq war, and a longtime local teacher.

"Almost all of them are very well known, with a background in the city. It should be a very good race," said Rafael Tejada, the city's bilingual elections coordinator, who expects strong turnouts in both the preliminary and final elections.

Latinos have won elective seats in several Massachusetts communities, including Boston, Chelsea, Holyoke, Lawrence, and Salem. But to date, none has won a mayor's office, according to Giovanna Negretti, executive director of *¿Oiste?*, a statewide organization that encourages and helps Latinos to run for office.

Negretti said the possibility that Lawrence could become the first city to elect a Latino to its highest office is "incredibly exciting."

"The important thing is to elect the best person who represents the interests of all the citizens in Lawrence," she said. "But given that Lawrence is 70 percent Latino in population, it's not a surprise we have six Latino candidates running for this very important position. We are proud of it and proud of Lawrence for coming so far politically."

Lawrence has had nine Latino mayoral candidacies in five elections dating to 1981. The closest to winning was Isabel Melendez, who captured 46 percent of the final election vote in losing to Sullivan in 2001.

This year's mayoral contenders are four-term state Representative William Lantigua; city councilors David C. Abdo, Patrick J. Blanchette, Marcos Devers, and Nilka Alvarez-Rodriguez; former councilors Nunzio Dimarca, Israel Reyes, and Julia Silverio; and first-time candidates Daniel B. Cotnoir, an Iraqi war veteran; and Pedro N. Payano, a Lawrence High School social studies teacher.

Devers lost to Sullivan in the final of the 2005 mayor's race. He served as interim mayor for about two months in 2001. Dimarca ran for mayor in 1987 and 1991.

Adding spice to the race are past political relationships among the candidates.

Devers, for instance, unsuccessfully challenged Lantigua for state representative in 2006 and 2008 (In the 2006 race, Lantigua got Devers's name removed from the primary ballot by challenging his residency status. Devers then ran a write-in campaign in the primary and the final.) Reyes, who lost a bid for state representative in 2000, was Lantigua's 2002 campaign manager. Payano was on Devers's 2005 campaign team.

The presence in the race of Cotnoir, who spent 10 months in Iraq, should also help spark interest. In what he says was an attempt to protect his house, Cotnoir in 2005 fired a shotgun in the direction of a crowd of noisy nightclub revelers - slightly injuring two of them - after he was struck by a bottle tossed through his window. In 2006, a jury acquitted him of two counts of assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, saying he acted in self-defense.

One uncertain dynamic is what effect, if any, Blanchette's tax difficulties might have on his candidacy. Blanchette confirmed this spring that the Internal Revenue Service had filed a tax lien against him after he had \$9,000 in back taxes accumulated over three years. Blanchette said this week he is on a payment plan and will have the tax debt retired by the end of the year.

"Hopefully, it's not an issue," he said, adding that people "know me to be a man of my word, and the matter will be resolved."

Richard Padova, a professor of history and geography at Northern Essex Community College, said it is notable that 10 candidates have emerged at a time when "being mayor or being governor is a pretty thankless job. You have to cut, you have to do layoffs, and you take the heat, the brunt of people's anger. Apparently, all these candidates feel they can pull the city up."

Padova believes the city's finances are the top issue in the race, noting that with its heavy reliance on state aid, Lawrence will be particularly hard-hit by the additional aid cuts that are looming. He said with an uptick of certain types of crimes in the city, public safety is also a key concern with voters.

Education and the need for more planning, cleaner streets, greater transparency in city government, and more local jobs, are among other issues raised by candidates in interviews.

A common challenge for all of those running is how to stand out in a field of 10 contenders.

"In a crowded field, everyone drowns everyone else out," Padova said. ■

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