

Chinatown's 'Glorious Flute' Facing an Unusual Primary Challenge

By ABRAHAM RIESMAN, Special to the Sun | August 25, 2008

THE CHALLENGERS AIMING TO UNSEAT THE ASSEMBLY SPEAKER IN NEXT MONTH'S DEMOCRATIC primary are going up against the good name Sheldon Silver's earned in Chinatown ♦ literally.



Konrad Fiedler

Speaker of the Assembly Sheldon Silver made a stop at a voter registration event surrounded by admiring community leaders in Confucius Plaza in Chinatown yesterday. They encouraged Democratic voter registration and support for his reelection campaign. Here, with Peter Lau, right, President of Chinese American Voters Federation, and the unofficial mayor of Chinatown Justin Yu, President of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association.

When Chinese-language newspapers write about Mr. Silver, they use Chinese characters that approximate the sound of his name as "siu-hwa." In Chinese, siu-hwa can be interpreted as "glorious flute."

For the first time in 22 years, Mr. Silver is running opposed in a primary for his district, which encompasses much of Lower Manhattan. Although leaders of large community organizations in Chinatown are pronouncing his victory a foregone conclusion, the neighborhood is becoming a political battlefield in the race.

Mr. Silver's two opponents, Luke Henry and Paul Newell, are courting residents dissatisfied with his economic policies. Meanwhile, the speaker is reaching out to community members in unprecedented ways.

"Shelly's opponents, when they have more stability, can engage him on the issues," David Chen, who heads a Chinatown social services center, the Chinese-American Planning Council, said. "But most people don't even know he's running against anyone. They think he'll be there forever."

Chief among the issues that Messrs. Henry and Newell are addressing is the matter of rezoning. With plans already under way to rezone the Lower East Side for redevelopment purposes, some residents and leaders of Chinatown organizations have accused Mr. Silver of favoring developers over average residents.

"What is Chinatown if Chinese people can't afford to live here? It's just going to be a sign that says, 'Chinatown,'" the head of the United Chinese Associations of Eastern USA, Steven Wong, said in his basement office on Doyers Street. "It's good that Silver's getting opposed, and I'm urging people to vote against him."

Mr. Henry has Mr. Wong's enthusiastic support. "Already, the East Village and the Lower East Side have been gentrified," Mr. Henry said. "The same thing will happen to Chinatown next."

A group of residents, the Coalition to Protect Chinatown and the Lower East Side, has taken a stand against Mr. Silver. They have received hundreds of written pledges in which voters commit to vote against anyone who will not "stand up against rezoning," according to a spokeswoman, Josephine Lee. "Silver hasn't done anything for the community in years," she added.

Although both challengers attack Mr. Silver on rezoning ♦ as well as issues such as access to health care and high-quality schooling ♦ they have different tactics for eroding his longstanding support.

Mr. Newell, who was endorsed by the New York Post yesterday, has taken a door-to-door approach, meeting with individual voters and small groups at churches, he said. "I haven't heard from any voter in this community that they're just going to back whoever they're told to," he added.

Mr. Henry has become a more visible figure, standing with leaders such as Mr. Wong. On August 3, he was the only candidate to attend a pro-Olympics rally held by a Chinese immigrant organization, the United Fujianese American Association. Ms. Lee said Mr. Henry is the only candidate to publicly support the anti-rezoning coalition.

Political officials say that Mr. Silver, however, enjoys deeply entrenched support and name recognition as a result of his 31 years as the assemblyman for Chinatown.

"Chinatown cannot lose a leader who has so well represented us, who knows all the issues of concern from over the years, and who has us in his heart," a political consultant, Chung Seto, former executive director of the New York State Democratic Party, said. "I would encourage voters to look at that, rather than elect someone who's a rookie and still needs to learn the plays."

"All of the momentum that this community has achieved may be up in the air again if Shelly's not re-elected," a businessman whose family has owned businesses in Chinatown since the 1920s, Jan Lee, said.

Pro-Silver leaders had different stories to tell about why they support him. Mr. Chen recalled the assemblyman's work to obtain multiple entrances to the Grand Street subway stop and to get shuttles running across the Manhattan Bridge during periods of construction.

"Shelly's someone who can get leverage with the MTA," he said. "The Chinese are very pragmatic, can see that he's been around for so many years and can deliver like that."

A spokesman for Mr. Silver, Jonathan Rosen, listed a litany of efforts the speaker has conducted involving Chinatown, from job training to the creation of Millennium High School.

Virginia Kee, 76, the founder of Chinatown's only formal Democratic Party organization, the United Democratic Organization, described Mr. Silver as "someone Chinatown could run to for support" throughout the past three decades.

Chinatown's is a rapidly aging population. According to the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Property, birth rates dropped by 27.9% in the area between 1970 and 2000. Ms. Kee said that aging plays into Mr. Silver's favor. Chinatown's Asian population has grown by more than 10% since Mr. Silver was elected, and its average household income has risen by 30.1%.

"The kids may have moved out, but the elderly stay here," she said. "People's support depends very much on the relationship that they've had with this person in the past."

Mr. Silver has recently been reaching out to Chinatown's residents and organizations in new ways. For example, leaders of two groups that represent thousands of new immigrants from the Fujian region of China said Mr. Silver arranged to meet with them for the first time last month.

"He's reaching out to more groups outside of the traditional spectrum," Mr. Chen said. He elaborated that Mr. Silver has been having political meetings with groups that usually are nonpolitical, such as family

organizations and the 125-year-old Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, often called the "City Hall of Chinatown."

When Mr. Silver arrived late to an event held by the Chinese-American Voters Federation at a meeting hall in Chinatown on August 13, the organizers greeted him with smiles.

"Here comes our best friend," Ms. Kee said as he entered.

Mr. Silver's remarks were brief and nonpartisan, pointing to the need for making registered voters unafraid to make it to the polls. But, other speakers peppered their remarks about voter registration with endorsements of Mr. Silver. Council Member John Liu of Queens spoke about Chinese-Americans' need to register for the primaries "to vote for Sheldon Silver."

The assemblyman seemed bashful. "I came here for a government event, but it turned into a political event," he said with a laugh.