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Two City Council candidates pin hopes on retail politics

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 29, 2011

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JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

City Council at-large candidates Will Dorcena (pictured) and Sean Ryan share a message: Entrenched incumbents have lost touch with voters.

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Will Dorcena and Sean Ryan acknowledge they are outsiders in the race to claim one of four at-large Boston City Council seats up for grabs Nov. 8. In terms of name recognition, endorsements, and fund-raising, they significantly trail the other five candidates.

But both men, the only contenders without prior council service, believe that after six months of knocking on doors and pressing the flesh, they might surprise doubters on election night.

“Although I’m not getting as many endorsements as the others, I’m certainly not raising as much money as the others, but I’m losing more weight than them,” said Dorcena, a small-business owner, adding later that he has shed 12 pounds since May. “I’m knocking on the doors.”

Their message: Their competitors have become too entrenched in City Hall politics and have lost touch with constituents.

Ryan, a musician and Boston school teacher, hopes to stand out as a fiscally conservative Democrat. He advocates, for example, that city schools phase out all non-special-needs busing, in part by allowing students to attend neighborhood schools, and says he would fight any increase in taxes, fees, and payments in lieu of taxes.

“It’s not hard for me to distinguish myself from the rest, because on a whole number of issues they all say the same thing,” Ryan said in an interview before a candidates’ forum at the Richard J. Murphy School K-8 in Dorchester. “I’m the one person who disagrees.”

“There is a much more conservative Democrat who exists in Boston,” he added. “If I weren’t on this ballot, that point of view would be completely lost.”

The youngest candidate, Ryan, 31, began in politics in 2008 when he ran unsuccessfully in a special election for an Ohio congressional seat while studying at a Cleveland graduate school after earning a bachelor’s in music at Harvard University.

The Jamaica Plain native and longtime resident has run for City Council twice before. He failed to make it past the preliminaries in 2009’s at-large race and in last year’s special election for a district seat. But the experience has “paid huge dividends,” he said.

Ryan said that in the current race he has campaigned heavily in Dorchester, where there is an active district race.

After losing last year’s contest for the District 6 seat, Ryan backed James W. Hennigan III, one of the two finalists. Matt O’Malley won, but the month Ryan spent campaigning to benefit his former rival fostered ties with the Hennigan family, which has strong political roots and helped Ryan gain support in West Roxbury.

Ryan, the first in his family to run for political office, said he has received key backing from James W. Hennigan Jr. The former state lawmaker said Ryan’s straightforward, fiscally conservative approach is what Boston needs.

“He speaks the truth; he speaks for the people,” Hennigan, 85, said in a telephone interview. “I’ve never seen or had a better candidate to campaign for. He’s going to shock this city.”

Dorcena, 38, owns a marketing and consultant business. The Hyde Park resident has never run for public office. From his Boston upbringing, he learned how to take control of his own destiny. He is one of eight siblings, including Linda Dorcena Forry, a state representative.

“Growing up in Dorchester, I was told, ‘Shot, dead, or in prison by 18, that’s your path, that’s your options.’

And I remember saying, 'Whoa, no thank you,' ” Dorcena said in an interview at a café in his native neighborhood.

At Boston College, the son of Haitian immigrants became president of the school’s student government. Dorcena was also elected president of Babson College’s graduate students while earning a master’s there.

He managed former state Representative Marie St. Fleur’s 1999 campaign when she became the first Haitian-American to hold public office in Massachusetts.

Dorcena said he wants to improve transparency at City Hall, including by making the city’s checkbook available online and holding more council hearings in the neighborhoods and at hours when most residents are not at work.

Elected officials, he said, are very proactive with outreach when it comes time to seeking votes. “How about being proactive and sharing information” with residents at times beyond election season, he asked.

All four incumbents - Felix G. Arroyo, John R. Connolly, Stephen J. Murphy, and Ayanna Pressley - are seeking reelection. The other candidate, Michael F. Flaherty, spent a decade on the council before stepping down to run unsuccessfully for mayor in 2009.

Ryan has reported spending about half of the \$1,400 raised since late April, according to campaign filings. Dorcena has raised \$8,700 and spent a few thousand more.

Among the other contenders, the least amount raised is \$83,000, by Pressley.

No matter the outcome, both Ryan and Dorcena said they plan to continue to be vocal after Nov. 8 and are proud of what their campaigns have achieved.

“You always want competition in races, even if the incumbents get reelected, because the people need a vehicle for their voices to be heard,” Ryan said. “Even if you can’t defeat an incumbent, at least incumbents have to start talking about what the people are talking about.”

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