



John Celock, May 12, 2008

## **Obama Campaign Inspires County Committee Effort in Brooklyn**

### ***50 candidates already recruited for September, New Kings Democrats aim for takeover***

A reform-minded group of Democratic young professionals in Brooklyn, inspired by Illinois Sen. Barack Obama's presidential campaign, is launching a challenge for county committee seats in the September primary election. Despite the excitement of those in the group, though, many outside the group remain unimpressed.

The New Kings Democrats goal is to reactivate the powerless county committee, which has generally taken a backseat to the borough's district leaders. Their goals are to force more frequent committee meetings, meetings of the operational committees, term limits on the county leader, prohibiting party leaders from holding elective office, having committee members handle constituent services in their districts and more openness of party operations.

"We would like to think of the Obama campaign as a real movement," said Matt Cowherd, the group's co-leader. "This looked like a good way to get those who leaned Democrat to have a say in the party."

Cowherd said that he and his co-leader, Rachel Lauter, started researching pathways for involvement in the party and saw the county committee seats as the best way to get other young professionals involved. With one male and female committee member per election district, and thousands of the sinecure positions, the pair believes it will be easy to elect their group into office.

They have recruited 50 candidates, roughly one percent of the committee, to seek seats in several neighborhoods, though the focus will be on Bushwick, Greenpoint and Williamsburg. A handful will run in Brooklyn Heights.

Cowherd, an attorney, and Lauter, who works for the city, have reviewed the Brooklyn Democratic by-laws to develop their platform. This includes pressing Assembly Member Vito Lopez, the county Democratic leader, to convene the various committees, including rules, law and campaigns, along with creating committees to produce policy proposals.

They claim there has not been a functional meeting of operational committee members in several decades.

The openness proposals are similar to those being advanced by a brownstone Brooklyn reform group led by Alan Fleishman, a longtime district leader. Fleishman said that while he applauds Cowherd and Lauter's efforts, he believes the existing system will prevent them from accomplishing their agenda by electing committee members only.

"Unless you elect 2,000 to 3,000 independent committee members, it would be impossible," Fleishman said. "The system is skewed to be top-down from the leader."

Fleishman instead encouraged the group to look into district leader races. Lauter said she and Cowherd decided that trying to work through the county committee would be a better way of bringing people into the process, though she said running for district leader positions was an option they might consider in the future.

While the county committee's powers, in theory, would put it in charge of the county party, in practice the committee has abdicated its authority to the district leaders and the county leader. The committee meets once every two years to effectively rubberstamp the party leadership, with a small percentage of members attending and the county leader holding proxies for the majority. The committee's most powerful function is nominating party choices for state legislative and congressional special elections.

Committee members assume office either by being elected in primaries, after surviving the petition challenge phase, or by being appointed to vacancies in a process controlled by votes at a meeting of the full committee.

Lopez said he had not heard of the New Kings Democrats, but said he welcomes them to run candidates. Various groups emerge to run county committee candidates in different parts of the borough every two years, he said. Those who are elected have a role in the county organization, he said.

“People have the right to run,” he said. “When they run, if they win, they will have an input into the agenda.”

Lopez declined to discuss the party's inner workings and Cowherd and Lauter's proposals for more openness and meetings, stating that he was focused on his work in Albany. Lopez said he would not discuss party operations for Brooklyn specifically out of context from party operations in the other four boroughs.

Lauter said she has not been in touch with anyone in the party leadership or any other faction of the Brooklyn party. The group recently launched a website, [www.newkingsdemocrats.com](http://www.newkingsdemocrats.com), to provide information for others looking to run for county committee.

The group has been working with Grassroots Initiative, which bills itself as the country's only not-for-profit political consulting firm. Alex Carabelli, Grassroots Initiative's deputy director, said his group has been active in recruiting county committee candidates for both parties.

The concept of a county committee challenge being inspired by a presidential campaign is not entirely new: Rev. Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 campaigns sparked similar efforts.

Few local Democrats outside the New Kings Democrats seem to have heard of the group at all, but most of those asked dismissed as naïve their goal of trying to transform the almost powerless county committee into a forum for hundreds of people to debate policy.

“They seem like well-meaning people, but they don't know what they are doing—in Brooklyn it's a relatively worthless exercise,” one consultant said. “If they want to do something constructive for the Democratic Party, they should find a candidate to run against [State Sen.] Marty Golden [(R-Brooklyn)].”