

The Democrats' Plans to Take Back Long Island: An Update

By Wendy Diller

Despite this year's lack of high-profile races, New York Democratic grassroots groups and local politicians are eyeing 2023 as an opportunity get ahead of the all-important 2024 election cycle – but so far, much of the action has been under the radar. Nevertheless, in recent interviews, a handful of activist and political leaders on Long Island described the status of such efforts, which should be of interest to anxious Manhattanites who are eager to help.

Here are some takeaways:

In April, state Democratic Party Chair Jay Jacobs announced formation of the first large-scale statewide Democratic 'coordinated campaign' in New York State. Its goal is to build out a year-round organizing infrastructure that will 'maximize utilization of shared resources' and focus on competitive races up and down the ballot, with an eye on winning House races in 2024.

Lizzy Weiss, former campaign director for House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries and an advisor to Pat Ryan's successful congressional race in the Hudson Valley in 2022, is the new director of this statewide effort, which has an early timeline and commitment to collaborate that is a departure from past campaigns, and which is hiring organizers in competitive areas across the state, initially prioritizing field managers to reach out to college students and communities of color. The coordinated campaign is entirely separate from the House Majority Super PAC's high-profile \$45 million New York Fund, which is committed to flipping red congressional seats in the state to blue, she points out. Weiss, who reports to NYS Dem chair Jay Jacobs and New York State Democratic Committee executive director Alexander Wang, says engaging and aligning with grassroots organizations statewide will be one of the top priorities because "no one wants 2022 to happen again."

The campaign includes year-round staff across the state, a battleground program, a coordinated media and digital program, voter file enhancements, constituency outreach

engagement, and programs focused on AAPI, Black, Hispanic, Jewish, youth, and college student voters.

Weiss and representatives from more than 20 organizations across the state, including grassroots groups, labor unions, and others, have been meeting biweekly via ZOOM as part of an initiative organized originally by the Working Families Party to build coalitions and map out short-term and longer-term actions for defeating Republicans in local and national races. Participating grassroots groups from Long Island include: Turn Nassau Blue, MakeTheRoadNY, Empire State Voices, MoveOn, Long Island Progressive Coalition, BendTheArc, and NY Communities for Change.

Unseating the beleaguered Congressman George Santos, who represents NYS Congressional District 3, is top of mind for Long Island activists, including the non-partisan grassroots organization Concerned Citizens of NY-03, but the most likely opportunity to succeed in that goal will be through the voting process in 2024. In July, a group of roughly 25 Long Island activists from CD3 held an unusual meeting via ZOOM with US

Congressman Dan Goldman, who represents CD10 in Manhattan, to discuss their concerns and also seek his help in resolving specific local issues that need attention but are not being addressed due to the nature of the Santos situation. According to Barry Nisman, who moderated the session, Goldman encouraged them to continue to work against Santos through the courts, but emphasized that the 2024 election is the best opportunity to succeed in their goals. He also volunteered to help resolve other problems facing CD3 district residents who feel a lack of political representation.

And Paul Bua, the founder of a new organization called Turn Nassau Blue and organizer on Long Island for Move On, who is working on a variety of initiatives to unseat Republican politicians in 2023, in what is a very local election cycle, had a few key points for activists seeking to get involved on Long Island. He notes that effective messaging has to be tailored to the local community. Issues that are relevant on Long Island these days range from the Sands Casino, which is proposed to be built in Uniondale, to congestion pricing, replacing aging

infrastructure, school book bans, repeal of the SALT tax, cost of living and affordability, including housing, and at a more national level, gun control, reproductive rights and the looming government shutdown. The environment, particularly shoreline protection and clean energy, is also a big concern.

Republicans control local politics in both Nassau and Suffolk Counties, but they are vulnerable, he notes. One challenge is lack of well-resourced outlets covering local political news, much of which is overshadowed by New York City media.

And while 2023 election cycle does not have the visibility or potential of 2024, how Democrats fare in local races on Long Island will help determine the playbook for next year.

In Suffolk County, the Suffolk County Executive Director will be up for grabs, as current director Steve Bellone, a Democrat, is term-limited.

Dave Calone, a former federal prosecutor, entrepreneur and activist, who is running so far unopposed on the Democratic ticket, has generated excitement among progressive groups.

Elsewhere on LI, former NYS Senator Jim Gaughran has entered the Democratic primary race for CD1, a seat won in 2022 by Republican Nick LaLota. Gaughran believes he has a roadmap for winning in a congressional district that has voted Republican for the last four House election cycles but which supported Biden in 2022. Still, he says, the district is purple, and redistricting has strengthened the Democrats' hand by about 4% since the most conservative portions of the old district were moved into CD2, enabling Biden to carry CD1.

The territory is a stronghold for Gaughran, regardless of how the New York State Court of Appeals ultimately rules in challenges to the state's latest congressional district maps that are now pending before the court.

Top challenges for Democrats are overwhelming negativity about Biden despite low unemployment and support for women's right to choose, and the influx of migrants into the state – although a large part of the latter problem is due to paralysis in Congress on immigration reform, Gaughran says.

Key issues with potential to motivate Democrats, independents and some moderate Republicans are reproductive health rights, gun safety, restoring the SALT tax deduction, and the environment. Reproductive rights remains a motivating issue for many New Yorkers, even though the state has strong support for women's right to choose because indirect measures passed by Congress could have an impact, such as de-funding public health clinics, which provide care for low-income women.