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NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: LOWER EAST SIDE

Loved and Hated, He Wants to Be Borough President

By ANDREW JACOBS

In the political caldron of the Lower East Side, where fire fights among anarchists, AIDS activists, Orthodox Jews and Puerto Ricans are common fare, the battle lines are not easy to decipher. But one division is always clear: those aligned with the district's combative Council member, Antonio Pagan, and those who despise him. "When it comes to Antonio, there's no middle ground," said Adam Silvera, a Democratic district leader in the East Village.

Now that he has decided to run for Manhattan Borough President, Mr. Pagan hopes he can appeal to voters outside his fractious district, where animosity toward him runs high. "I've accomplished everything I set out to do in the Council," said Mr. Pagan, 38, a vocal advocate for quality-of-life issues who fiercely opposes increased social services and low-income housing in his district. "It's time to share my skills with the rest of the borough."

A charismatic speaker and adept fund-raiser, Mr. Pagan would be a formidable candidate, according to many political observers, especially appealing to Hispanic and conservative voters. So far, Assemblywoman Deborah J. Glick, State Senator David A. Paterson and Council members C. Virginia Fields and Adam Clayton Powell 4th have indicated their intentions to run for the Borough President's job, currently held by Ruth W. Messinger, who plans to challenge Mayor Giuliani next year.

Most political analysts agree that handicapping the race is difficult, especially since the field is expected to widen now that term limits in the Council appear all but certain. But Mr. Pagan, political analysts say, stands to benefit from a crowded field of liberal Democrats, two of them women and three who represent Harlem. "As sure as night follows day, if David, Virginia and I stay in the race, none of us will win," Mr. Powell said.

However, if Mr. Pagan were to face only Ms. Glick, the popular, openly gay Assemblywoman, some say she would have an edge in Manhattan, where voters tend to be liberal. "I think Antonio would have a hard time winning in Manhattan," said Hank Morris, a consultant. "Especially since he's not well known outside his district."

Over the last year, Mr. Pagan has made an effort to increase his profile beyond his district. During the recent skirmish over a proposed Pathmark supermarket in East Harlem, Mr. Pagan helped lead the opposition to the Giuliani administration's plans to grant tax breaks to the supermarket chain.

During his almost five years in office, Mr. Pagan has stood out as one of the Council's most colorful

members, but his caustic style has earned him scores of enemies. "Antonio might not be a star pupil of Miss Manners, but he calls it like he sees it, and that can be refreshing sometimes," said Councilman Andrew Eristoff.

Mr. Pagan revels in his reputation for brusqueness, saying, "I don't get paid to smile for the cameras." Mr. Pagan, who is openly gay, enjoys scant support among gay activists. This year he angered some by opposing a permit for Wigstock, the annual drag festival.

"To me, being called combative is the highest compliment," he said. "It means that I'm no political hack and that I'll always be independent. I think Manhattan voters can appreciate that." ANDREW JACOBS

Chart/Photos: "COUNCIL CONTENDERS: A Race to Watch" From the monied precincts of Murray Hill to the predominantly Jewish co-ops of Grand Street to the impoverished housing projects along Avenue D, Council District 2 is one of the city's most diverse -- and combustible. With Antonio Pagan's decision to run for Manhattan Borough President, his Council seat will be open for the first time in decades. Here's a look at five possible contenders in next year's Democratic primary. ANDREW JACOBS **JUDA ENGELMAYER, 27 Career Special assistant to State Comptroller Carl H. McCall, former legislative aide to Assemblyman Sheldon Silver. Home Grand Street Likely support base Orthodox Jews Quote "Delancey and Orchard Streets are dying and no one cares."** ALBERT FABOZZI, 46 Career Interior designer, president of Tompkins Square Neighborhood Coalition, former chairman of Community Board 3. Home East Seventh Street Likely support base Tompkins Square area and gay men Quote "I don't rubber-stamp anything." SYLVIA FRIEDMAN, 57 Career nonprofit executive, member, Community Board 6, state committeewoman Home East 15th Street Likely support base Murray Hill, Gramercy Park and Union Square areas Quote "I'm a liberal but I'm not off the wall." MARGARITA LOPEZ, Career Social worker, Democratic district leader Home East 11th Street Likely support base Housing activists, East Village progressives Quote GEORGE RODRIGUEZ, 30 Career Director of constituent services for Councilman Pagan, former Democratic district leader Home East 12th Street. Likely support base Hispanics and moderates Quote "I'm a quieter version of Antonio."