

Race To Represent 2018 :An Interview with Assembly District 75

Incumbent Richard Gottfried

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Moderator: Elinor Tatum

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Richard G.: Manhattan Neighborhood Network in partnership with the New York Amsterdam News and the League of Women Voters of New York State presents Race To Represent, a Manhattan neighborhood network election initiative.

Elinor Tatum: Hello, I'm Elinor Tatum. New Yorkers will be voting in the general election on Tuesday, November sixth. They will cast their ballots for offices including Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, Controller, State Senate, and State Assembly. The New York State Assembly works alongside the State Senate and the governor to create laws and establish the state budget. Today we are bringing you an interview with Assembly Member Richard Gottfried, who has represented the 75th District since 1971. He is running unopposed in the general election this November.

Elinor Tatum: District 75 covers Murray Hill, Chelsea, Clinton, portions of midtown Manhattan, and the Upper West Side.

Elinor Tatum: Welcome. Now you've been a member of the New York State Assembly longer than any other member. What changes have you seen over the last term compared to two years ago?

Richard G.: Over the last term, well, in the last two or three terms we've seen a lot of new members elected, a lot younger than usual, a lot more women, a lot more women and men of color, a lot of people who have come to the Assembly really pumped up and eager to speak out, and make changes. You know, you get some of that every couple of years over the years, but I think since decades ago, I haven't really seen that kind of explosion of real talent and excitement, and with this year's elections we're expecting to see more of that, not only in the Assembly, but in the State Senate as well, coming partly from the primary victories against the IDC, and partly from what I hope will be some flipping of Republican seats to Democratic.

Elinor Tatum: Do you think this is just the course of evolution in the State Senate and the Assembly, or do you think it has anything to do with the election of Donald Trump in the White House?

Richard G.: Well, I think what's going on in this year's elections is very much, and you know a title wave from 2016, and from what's happened since then, but the new people who were elected in 2014 and 2016, I think that was just a reflection of a new generation, of new people getting involved in politics, of a lot more concern about inequality in our society, and racial disparities. I think that has really enlivened in a very good way the Assembly, and now it's happening in the State Senate.

Elinor Tatum: You've said that the healthcare system is rigged against working people, and Congress and the Trump administration are working to restrict healthcare access even more. How is that rigged?

Richard G.: Well, you know our system is so heavily rooted in insurance companies, and insurance companies want the same premium. They're going to charge the same deductibles, the same network restrictions and whatnot, whether you are a multi-million dollar CEO, or the receptionist, or the janitor, and that's not fair. For people who make hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars, a \$5,000 or \$6,000 deductible is not really a big imposition, but for somebody who's making average, what an average household makes, that's an enormous dent in your income, and a real obstacle to healthcare. The whole way our system is financed, I mean unless you're very poor, or you're old enough to be on Medicare, it is a system that really works against working people.

Elinor Tatum: Well, you are the Healthcare Committee Chair, and you've sponsored the New York Health Act, a single-payer plan to be introduced in this next state legislative session. A plan without cost barriers to patients that would cover every New York City, New York State, resident regardless of wealth, income, age, immigration or health status. Is this universal healthcare for New York?

Richard G.: Yeah, this is ... I've been carrying this bill for a long time, and it's finally I think really catching on with a lot of people. Nationally it's often called single-payer or improved Medicare for all. This is a bill to set that up here in New York State because, unfortunately, I think we're a long way from having a national government willing to take this on.

Richard G.: It would be universal, complete health coverage for all 20 million of us, no premiums, no deductibles, no co-pays, no restricted provider network. It would be funded, I think fairly, through a progressively graduated tax on payroll income and on currently taxable non-payroll income, like capital gains and dividends.

Elinor Tatum: Has the budget office come out with anything as to how this would shake out?

Richard G.: Well, the state division of the budget hasn't looked at this. They basically look at what governors propose, but the RAND Corporation, which is one of the country's major consulting firms, this summer published an analysis of it, and they're conclusion was that it would save New York money, that while we would be paying taxes to support the plan, that would be substantially less than what we now spend in premiums and deductibles and the like. Their analysis had a range of assumptions, what they called their base assumption showed us saving a little bit, but others of their assumptions, which I think were actually more accurate and more realistic, showed that we could be saving tens of billions of dollars for New Yorkers under a single-payer system.

Elinor Tatum: Property developers have gotten the green light to build a massive 668 foot tall building on 69th Street and Amsterdam Avenue despite major pushback from the community. You're one of the many politicians against the Super Tower going up at this location. Is this part of a bigger issue of over development in Manhattan? Tell us about how the Committee for Environmentally Sound Development is fighting back.

Richard G.: Well, it's an ongoing battle, often an uphill battle, and by the way there's not only the building on Amsterdam and 69th, which I was at a rally this morning protesting against it, but there is an even taller building on West 66th Street between Columbus and Central park West that the developer wants to build 770 feet high, about 10 or 15% higher than the building on Amsterdam.

Richard G.: These are developers who say they're just working within existing zoning. What they're doing is, I think, really twisting the zoning law beyond recognition to put together enough allowances to let them go this high. We are in court against the building on Amsterdam Avenue. There are legal challenges that have been filed against the building on 66th Street. This kind of thing is happening in a lot of areas in the city. A lot of those super tall buildings have already gone up. We're gearing up for a broader fight, looking also filing legislation to try to tighten the rules on those super tall buildings.

Richard G.: I've been in community work and politics on the West Side for many, many years. We've been fighting this fight for decades. We win some very important battles, some we don't. You mentioned the Committee for Environmentally Sound Development, headed by an amazing woman named Olive Freud. They have been leading this fight and others for decades. The thing about Westsiders is we are adamant, we are united, we don't quit. By the way, the same fight is going on in the rest of my district in Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen. We win some of those fights, some of them we are able to force the developer to compromise down, but it's a constant struggle.

Elinor Tatum: Now some of the ways that they're able to get the ability is by buying air rights from surrounding buildings. Is there any way to curb that transfer of air rights?

Richard G.: Well, transfer of air rights or development rights goes back a long way. Essentially it says if you and I both own a six-story building, but we could both build 12 stories, I can buy your unused rights to build six, and glue it to my site, and now I can go up 18 stories, or higher if the building gets narrower.

Richard G.: In many ways, there's nothing wrong with that principle. While it lets this building go higher, it does help to guarantee that the building over here won't go higher. It's when those rules get really distorted, and you're buying development rights from sites that are far distant from yours, and then using other gimmicks like putting in blank space in the middle of your building so that the people at the higher floors get to be 700 feet high and not a mere 500 feet high, and then you can charge them a lot more for their apartment. These are real problems, and that's what we're trying to fight.

Elinor Tatum: And it's an ongoing battle across the city.

Richard G.: Yeah, and of course, developers also are constantly going to the city, and asking to change the zoning to let them build taller even without having to buy air rights from their neighboring site.

Elinor Tatum: Now what issues in your district would you like to see get more funding?

Richard G.: More funding? Well, what wouldn't I? Primarily three things, in no particular order.

Richard G.: Mass transit, which is horribly underfunded, both for capital funding and operating funding. New Yorkers have a really rundown transit system. We pay about the highest percentage of the operation of the system, comes out of fares rather than public dollars, of almost any system in the country.

Richard G.: Education. Under the court decision that the Court of Appeals handed down over a decade ago, our schools are owed several billion dollars from the State Legislature. We've been fighting for that.

Richard G.: I think the third thing I would put on the list is affordable housing. Not only are we seeing more and more homeless people in the city because there is no affordable housing for them, the people who are lucky enough to live in housing are paying enormous prices for smaller and smaller dwellings. We need more money into affordable housing. We need stronger rent laws to protect the housing that we have.

Elinor Tatum: Now you just mentioned mass transit and the MTA. Do you support the MTA's Fast Forward Plan?

Richard G.: Yeah, the Fast Forward Plan, which is I think a 30 billion dollar capital plan for the transit system, is long overdue, enormously needed. A lot of the problems we experience every day on the subway, and I know that because that's how I

get to work every day when I'm not in Albany ... The delays, the overcrowding, are all largely the result of ancient signaling systems that make it harder to run the trains faster, aging equipment, inadequate equipment. It's not safe and it's not comfortable and efficient for passengers. Long overdue.

Elinor Tatum: You and some other elected officials started the signalfail.com website, and through this website people are able to document how signal failures are disrupting New Yorkers' commutes. Is this a way of calling out the MTA to make the signal system a priority?

Richard G.: Well, I think the MTA understands the issue. That's why they've got this 30 billion dollar plan. I think it's more a way of signaling, if you will, to the press and to everyone in elected office, that what the MTA says they need to do, they really do need to do it, and we need to come up with the money to pay for it.

Elinor Tatum: You were speaking about affordable housing and homelessness. In your district, how are you working to keep affordable housing in your district, and from squeezing out the longstanding residents?

Richard G.: Well, several things. One is whenever developers come forth with a proposal for something bigger, I and the other elected officials in the are and the community board and block associations, demand that before the city gives them what they want, we make them give us 20 or 30% of the building to be permanent affordable housing. We've gotten a lot done that way.

Richard G.: Developers and landlords are constantly trying to harass tenants out of their rent-regulated apartments so they can jack up the rent, or completely deregulate the apartment. They do what is called harassment by construction, where in an occupied building they start tearing down walls, and making life hell for the residents, hoping that they will move out. We work all the time with tenant groups to fight back against their landlords trying to force them out, to help tenants find out whether their landlord is overcharging them, et cetera.

Richard G.: Of course, in Albany it is a constant fight to protect and strengthen the rent laws, which are up for renewal next year. Hopefully we will have a democratic majority in the State Senate, so that the bills that the Assembly always passes to strengthen the rent laws and protect tenants can get passed in the State Senate.

Elinor Tatum: Do you think the laws for determining how the rent control increases are determined is flawed?

Richard G.: Yeah, they do not take into account the ability of tenants to afford increases. They don't take into account the extra income that landlords get by throwing people out of rent-regulated apartments and converting them to free market. Landlords are allowed exorbitant increases for what they claim are "major capital improvements," which are often just ordinary keeping up conditions in the building, and often involve overcharges. When one tenant moves out and

another one moves in, the landlord is allowed an extra jump in the rent, which has no relation to the landlord's need, and actually gives a landlord an incentive to harass a tenant to move out. There are a lot of problems in our rent laws that we've been fighting to fix.

Elinor Tatum: How do you plan to attract and keep small businesses, which are the backbones in most of our communities, in your district?

Richard G.: One problem for small businesses particularly in Manhattan, and on in Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen and the Upper West Side, is much like tenants, they're having a harder and harder time paying the rent and getting their lease renewed. Business, commercial tenants have no rent law protection. If you're a big corporation, you've got some clout to fight back against the landlord, but if you're a small business, you can easily be wiped out and replaced with the next bank or pharmacy or nail salon. That's a real problem for longstanding mom-and-pop businesses.

Richard G.: There were proposals in the City Council to enact a rent protection system for small businesses. There has been some question raised as to whether the City Council has authority to do that. If it turns out they don't, then we certainly ought to try to do that at the state level.

Elinor Tatum: And our last question, the New York State Assembly and Senate have passed legislation allowing the use of medical marijuana to treat pain as an alternative to using opioids for treatment for substance use disorders. What is your position on the decriminalization of marijuana and it's impact on the judicial system?

Richard G.: First of all, the Medical Marijuana Law, the basic law, was passed four years ago. That was my bill. The bill's to liberalize it have been my bills. I have been committed to that for a long, long time, and it was long effort.

Richard G.: I do think we ought to allow adult use for nonmedical purposes in New York. The word decriminalization, actually, in 1977 New York passed, oh, it was my bill ... to decriminalize possession of small amounts. It's only a violation to possess under about three-quarters of an ounce.

Richard G.: Now people are still getting arrested in outrageous numbers because if you possess in a public place, then it becomes a misdemeanor, and what police have been doing is harassing, invariably, young men of color. White people hardly ever get stopped and told to empty their pockets. If the kid pulls out a joint, then the policemen says, "Oh, you're possessing marijuana in open view in a public place." Misdemeanor. Tens of thousands of people have been getting arrested for that.

Richard G.: So changing that law even more, and allowing adult use, I think makes perfect sense. I think it would ... this is not about people having a good time at parties, which is why I hate the term recreational use. It's about stopping the law from

ruining lives of tens of thousands of primarily young people, primarily people of color. That should not be what law enforcement is in the business of doing.

Elinor Tatum: Are you a supporter and a proponent of bail reform?

Richard G.: Very much so. The cash bail system really is an outrage. It deprives people of liberty based on ability to pay, whether they are ultimately found guilty or not. We've had people languishing in jail for months, and in some cases years, just because they couldn't pay bail, and ultimately they're exonerated. That's outrageous.

Richard G.: Bail decisions oughta be made on whether you're likely to show up in court, and the presumption of innocence really needs to apply at every stage of the process. Unfortunately, today it really does not.

Elinor Tatum: Well, thank you so much for being here today.

Richard G.: My pleasure, thanks for doing this.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you for your almost 48 years of service.

Richard G.: Never had a boring day.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you for watching. Please remember to vote. The general election is Tuesday, November sixth. For more information on voting, locating your poll site, and all the candidates, you can visit our website RaceToRepresent.com, or the League of Women Voters website, LWVNY.org.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you for watching Race To Represent on Manhattan Neighborhood Network.