

Race To Represent 2018: An Interview with State Assembly District 73
Incumbent Dan Quart

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Moderator: Elinor Tatum

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Elinor Tatum: Manhattan Neighborhood Network in partnership with the New York Amsterdam News and the League of Women Voters of New York States presents Race to Represent, a Manhattan Neighborhood Network collection initiative. Hello. I'm Elinor Tatum. New Yorkers will be voting in the general election on Tuesday, November 6th. They will cast their votes for offices including governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, controller, state senate, and state assembly.

Elinor Tatum: Today we bring you an interview with one of the candidates running for New York State Assembly in District 73. The winner will take office in January 2019. The New York State Assembly works alongside the State Senate and the governor to create laws and establish the state budget. The 73rd District represents approximately 130,000 residents. It covers the East Side of Manhattan, including Lenox Hill, Midtown East, Turtle Bay, Kips Bay, Sutton Place, and the Upper East Side. Joining us is the democratic candidate and incumbent assembly member Dan Quart. The republican candidate, Dr. Jeff Ascherman, could not be here. Welcome. We're going to jump right in. The New York State has a \$168 billion budget. What issues in your district would you like to see get more funding?

Dan Quart: Transportation. I would say transportation and funding of the MTA's capital plan is the single most important issue, probably for the City of New York, but certainly for the quality of life of people in the Upper East Side and Midtown Manhattan, the people I represent. The preliminary numbers on the Second Avenue subway demonstrate what we thought for many years would be the result, that there's been an offset of volume on the Lexington line, reductions of 20% to 30% on 96th Street, 86th Street, and 77th Street. But still, the Lexington line has fallen into different states of disrepair over the last years, not enough work or money being spent on track and signal work.

Dan Quart: The MTA has set forth a \$19 billion plan that will be debated next year in Albany. Funding that plan is significant for the entire system, but specifically part of that \$19 billion would also go to track and signal upgrade work on the Lexington line. This will be critically important to improving service on the Lexington line, being able to get more trains in the tunnel at a particular time, rehabilitation of different stations on the Lexington line that have fallen in

disrepair. So while there's been progress with the extension of the Q train, the Second Avenue subway, which has offset volume on the Lexington line, more has to be done on rehabilitating the Lexington line to a state of good repair.

Elinor Tatum: Now you secured an extra \$1 billion in capital funding to continue building the Second Avenue subway line. Where does phase two and phase three currently stand on that?

Dan Quart: That was the work of the Assembly, myself and my colleagues in Manhattan pressuring and advocating for an increase of spending of \$1 billion that we were successful in the last MTA capital plan. Now we'll be talking about the next capital plan, which the current one includes scoping and some construction of Second Avenue subway north from 96th to 125th Street. As a member of the corporations committee that has oversight of the MTA, I've spoken out for years. I felt we should've taken advantage of low interest rates and both began construction going north, as we are now, but also south to link up where the Second Avenue subway stops at 63rd Street to get to Grand Central and 14th Street.

Dan Quart: Regardless, we need to continue construction beginning north to 125th Street to extend the Second Avenue subway and open up East Harlem, as well as moving south. Creating a full length Second Avenue subway as a major transportation artery will improve the system, not only for my constituents, not only for the City of New York, but regionally as well. People come into New York City from the suburbs in Connecticut. It will advance New York City as a world capital and make sure that we don't fall behind in this critical needed service, which is transportation.

Elinor Tatum: Do you support the MTA's fast forward plan?

Dan Quart: I do, but we do need to see the initial presentation was favorable. And I said so publicly, but we need to see more specifics from Andy Byford and the MTA about exactly how each dollar would be spent. The New York Times did an expose about some of the problems with the Second Avenue subway construction, some of the overruns. My constituents will want to know how each and every dollar is being spent, so it has to be more than a Power Point presentation or blueprint. It needs to be a specific plan explaining how this money will go and make sure that the MTA will take the necessary steps to ensure that none of this money is wasted.

Elinor Tatum: That's why the assembly passed the legislation that would require the MTA to submit the five year capital plan. Is that correct?

Dan Quart: That's why we do, I take my oversight responsibilities of the MTA seriously. We should be doing more hearings. But we should help the MTA, but we should also oversee how they're spending the public's money because we did see from the Second Avenue subway construction, although it was a critically important

project, and I was an advocate for it both before I was elected, I was a member of the community board, chair of the Second Avenue Subway Task Force. But I want the next phase to be brought in on budget, on time. And I think it's important to continue to have support for these large scale projects to show the public that our dollars are being spent wisely and not wasted in any way.

Elinor Tatum: Okay. Let's move from underground to above ground, and go to congestion pricing. You cosponsored the move in 2016, the Move New York Bill. Are you satisfied with taxi and for hire vehicle fee enacted in the current budget? And what kind of congestion plan would you like to see put in place?

Dan Quart: I'm not satisfied with the surcharge or tax on taxi cabs. I think in many ways it's regressive and was a disproportionate tax on my constituents. But more to the point, it's a piecemeal approach to a comprehensive problem, and that's congestion in the business district, part of which I represent. I think the average rate of speed for cars in and around the business district is something like 4.6 or 4.9 miles per hour. Traffic is moving at a snarl if you make the mistake of driving into the central business district. For a whole host of reasons, we need an expansive congestion pricing plan. And that includes a fee for driving into the central business district.

Dan Quart: And it's not just about revenue. It's also, this is the right policy environmentally for Manhattan and New York City. In my district, which includes part of Midtown, we have some of the worst air quality in Manhattan. That's in part because of antiquated boilers burning different types of fuel. But it's also because of the sheer number of cars driving in and around not just the central business district, but in Midtown, the Upper East Side, the Lower East Side. I think these policies on a full comprehensive congestion pricing are both what we need in terms of a dedicated source of revenue for the MTA's capital plan, but it's also the right policy environmentally for the City of New York.

Elinor Tatum: What kind of plan would you like to see put in place?

Dan Quart: A tolling plan. A tolling plan on the bridges, but that's separate and distinct. But also a ring around the business district proper, however we define the business district. But for certain hours during the weekday, there would be a charge for driving into the business district. And that can be done through sort of cashless tolls that exist on the RFK Bridge and other ways. So there is a way through technology to do it in a somewhat seamless way. We have to pay for the technology, but the revenue projections I've seen show that the resources coming back, or the money coming back to the city and the state of New York would far outweigh whatever initial capital expenditures we had to pay for the congestion pricing plan.

Elinor Tatum: So it's similar to what they've done in London.

Dan Quart: Yes, London and other cities. I think London is a good example in how it's been mostly successful, how it should be done here.

Elinor Tatum: Except traffic is just as bad.

Dan Quart: Traffic is ... Getting down the volume of vehicles is a difficult thing to do. There is no guarantee that a congestion pricing would automatically reduce the numbers. But it would be a step forward, and it would bring us into what modern cities are doing with their central business district.

Elinor Tatum: All right. Now affordable housing is also a very big issue in New York, especially here in Manhattan. How does the legislature, and especially in your district, how do you plan to try to keep it affordable?

Dan Quart: Well, this coming year in the legislature, the rent stabilization rules come up for renewal. And my hope is that it is renewed because rent stabilization, although less so in my district than when I was first elected seven years ago because of vacancy decontrol, there are less units that are protected for middle income people. So I think the legislature and the here and now next year will have to deal with rent stabilization. And that is a program that affords the opportunity for so many middle income people to remain in the communities where they raise their children and they spend their tax dollars.

Elinor Tatum: Now in your district in particular, there is an issue that a lot of other parts of New York don't face, which is the land lease issue. And a lot of the land leases are going to be up in the next 20 years or so for a lot of buildings. Has that been an issue that owners and renters have come across lately?

Dan Quart: Not particularly. But to your point, yes, it will be an issue coming forth in Manhattan about some of these leases. I grew up in Mitchell Lama Housing, and I probably lived in one of the last Mitchell Lamas that existed on the Upper East Side at Ruppert Yorkville on 91st and 92nd Street. And that came out of Mitchell Lama about 13 years ago. And for some, that allowed the opportunity for ownership. But for many others, it led to displacement. And that is a big problem that we see, that people being priced out of their neighborhoods. That in part may be responsibility of a city state partnership because it involves some zoning laws. And that's within the purview of the city council. But this is an area where the state and city have to partner on a plan for the future. But it all comes down to helping people stay in the communities in which they live in and raise their families in.

Elinor Tatum: Now what do you say the tenant advocates who believe landlords who use preferential rent laws as a loophole to inflate apartment prices?

Dan Quart: Well, we certainly in the assembly and the legislature have been, I think, very good in terms of passing laws and helping, working with the governor for his specific units on ensuring that landlord practices that are improper are being

dealt with. I think in the assembly, we've been a good advocate for tenants, and I'm sure we will continue to do so during the next legislative session.

Elinor Tatum: And do you advocate for property tax reform?

Dan Quart: I've been a leader in that in Albany my seven years. I've written a white paper about it. I organized and had an oversight hearing on the property tax system with the city's department of finance provided testimony. I believe the four class system is not serving my constituents particularly well. I think we need a holistic reform of the four class property tax system. So far, the city administration has not come forth with a plan. But that is not all too much different than any other city administration. It is somewhat a third rail type issue to try and reform the four class property tax system. It was created in 1981, and over the veto of them Governor Kerry. It is controversial. But it provides certain benefits to class one homeowners that I think no longer need to be provided. And I think reform based upon reforming class one and looking at ways to ease that burden of class two, three, and four, would be the right approach for the future of reforming the system.

Elinor Tatum: And can you just tell us what class one, two, three and four are very quickly?

Dan Quart: Sure. Class one are single family homeowners in all parts of New York City, mostly. Class two are co-op and condominium owners. Class three is the commercial class. Excuse me. Class three is the utility class, 79% which is Con Edison, and class four is the commercial class. We need a complete comprehensive reform of our four class system. Thus far, I haven't seen any indication in the legislature, or at the city level, that the city administration or anyone at the state level is willing to really look at reforming our property tax system.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you. Now like much of the city, the Upper East Side has seen a notable spike in store closings over the past year. It has also seen a prolonged vacancy of many of these storefronts. And some have taken well over a year, sometimes two and three years, to rent out. Do you have a plan to attract small businesses and to keep local business in these storefronts?

Dan Quart: I do. It's property tax reform. It's really the answer to my last question. Property taxes as part of the rent that small businesses must pay, small businesses pay as part of their monthly rent or their yearly rent, has expanded. I don't have the exact numbers, but I'm sure it's 15%, 20%. As small business owners, I'm not talking about the large stores, which can afford this as a different course, a different business model. But small businesses can't afford that 10%, 15%, 20% rent increase. And the property tax portion of their rent increase that their landlords offset to them is hurting their ability to stay in business. That is part of the reason why you see so many small businesses unable to make it more than three months, six months, or a year and going out of business. That's why you see vacant storefronts on the East Side and elsewhere throughout New York

City. Property tax reform, I think, would go a long way to reducing the monthly rent in some ways to these small business owners.

Elinor Tatum: Do you think there should be a penalty to landlords who keep their storefronts open for, say, over six months, over a year? Did the mayor try to do something like that?

Dan Quart: I'm not sure. I mean, it's a municipal issue. I don't think that's ... I'm not sure the state should be involved in penalizing landlords in that respect. But I think rather than a penalty, I think we should look at ways through legislation and also at the city level to incentivize that practice not happening, and that working with landlords in good faith when they show good faith to try and find ways to help them rent out their properties.

Elinor Tatum: Now in 2017, the Department of Aging report said that New York City's senior population is growing bigger than ever, living longer than ever, and getting poorer than ever. There are over 1.4 million New Yorkers that are currently age 60 and older, and by 2030, that number will rise to over 1.8 million. How would you plan on supporting the needs of that growing number of senior citizens in your district?

Dan Quart: It is an important issue. Society is properly defined about how it takes care of its most vulnerable, whether that's children, whether that's people who are sick, or whether that's the elderly, who deserve so much in our city for helping make the city what it is, for being the tax base for so many years and staying in New York City, investing in the city. There are so many things we need to do, from housing. I'll just take one part, on healthcare, which is an important part because in some ways financially, we were a victim of our own success. We have a good medical system. And people are living longer. That's a great thing. But that means we as a city and a state have to provide more resources to an aging population.

Dan Quart: One way we do that is through healthcare. And I think we've done some good things at the state level. The governor created by executive order health exchanges after the federal healthcare act. And that, he had to do by executive authority because the republicans in the state senate refused to pass legislation that created an exchange. So the governor created an exchange, and we in the legislature have worked to try and expand the basis of coverage, out of network benefits, that's been something of a frustration. But in essence, we have a multi-tiered level healthcare system in this state. There's Medicaid for those who are poor or elderly. There's the exchange for people who can't or don't get health insurance through their employer.

Dan Quart: What we need to do for an aging population is ... The exchange is mostly for people who remain in the workforce. But we know that people remain in the workforce for longer and longer. So we have to expand the coverage under the healthcare exchange while also looking very hard at Medicaid and what we can

do to provide greater services to seniors while also keeping the Medicaid budget within the realms of something the state taxpayers can afford. It's a holistic thing. There are many things to do. But expanding health coverage is one of the most important things we can do for our expanding senior population.

Elinor Tatum: Now you've stated that the New York public libraries are in urgent need of renovations and upgrades. You're the chair of the libraries' committee. And you were able to get increased funding in this year's budget for our public library system. What funds have been secured for your district's mid Manhattan library branch?

Dan Quart: I was the library's chair last year. And I was proud of my efforts of securing more money for the library budget than was initially suggested. I think it's important to note that with the federal administration and its reduction of all sorts of services and grants to existing federal programs and agencies, that directly led to a deprivation of resources to the state level. And libraries was one of the area that was going to receive less money in federal grants and other things. It's important I think for people to remember that the different levels of government are connected. And when the federal government makes poor decisions on grants and fundings, it can directly affect state agencies and state budgets. It did so in the libraries' budget. And we were forced to look at new ways of funding for capital and for the day to day operation of our libraries.

Dan Quart: And the reason why I think libraries, and I learned this [inaudible 00:19:17] from my time as chair of the libraries' committee and visiting libraries throughout the state, libraries are much more than places that people can come and take out books. For poor people, they're a place for free wifi access. They're meeting spots for all sorts of different groups, community organizations. They're almost like community centers. And that exists in the Midtown library branch, the one on 79th Street, all the way up to in Upstate New York, where libraries act as really community centers. And taking out books is just one of the many things that occurs in that location.

Dan Quart: That being said, the budget resources I was able to secure as libraries chair went to expanding capital and operation. And the reason why capital is so important is because many of these libraries are aging. Their walls are breaking down. Their boilers are antiquated. And they need capital to reinvest in the building because without fully functioning buildings, these libraries cannot continue to act as community centers.

Elinor Tatum: And also, especially the summer, a lot of them are also used as cooling centers.

Dan Quart: They are. They certainly are.

Elinor Tatum: And then this is going to be our last question. What is your position on the legalization of marijuana and its impact on the judicial system?

Dan Quart: I'm for the complete legalization of marijuana for a couple of reasons. First and foremost, I think the city council had some important oversight hearings. And we also saw from the numbers on arrest, there has not been a major drop in the arrests of marijuana. Now there's been a transfer from arrest to more summonses, but I still think this is the wrong policy approach. I think we need a complete legalization, for one very specific reason. We've seen from the arrest records that arrests on marijuana are disproportionately for people of color. In Manhattan, it happens mostly in communities in East Harlem and Washington Heights, where I grew up. And disproportionately, those arrests are people of color. And we need to stop. With legalization, we'll hopefully should ensure that the arrests and the summonses are discontinued.

Dan Quart: Also, I think we'll be honest, it's an important revenue source for the state of New York, but that's secondary. I think we've seen that marijuana as employed as a criminal justice matter is wrong, has a disproportionate impact. And as someone who is also in criminal court and represents poor people through the city's 18B indigent defense panel, I see when I'm in court, the disastrous effects it has on people's lives from unnecessary court appearances and intervention between law enforcement for smoking marijuana. So for a whole host of reasons, I think we need to legalize it. And we should do it in the next legislative session.

Elinor Tatum: All right. Well, thank you so much for being here with us today.

Dan Quart: Thank you.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you for watching. Please remember to vote. The general election is Tuesday, November 6th. 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. Thank you for watching Race to Represent on Manhattan Neighborhood Network. Good bye.