

Race To Represent 2018: An Interview with
Robert Rodriguez, State Assembly D68 Candidate

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Moderator: Julie Walker

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Speaker 1: Manhattan Neighborhood Network, in partnership with the League of Women Voters of New York State, presents Race to Represent, a MNN election initiative.

Julie Walker: Hello, I'm Julie Walker. New York voters will head to the polls on Thursday, September 13 for party primary elections. They will cast their ballots in many statewide and local races, including for Governor, Attorney General, and members of both houses of the New York State Legislature, including State Assembly District 68. The New York State Assembly is the lower house of the New York State Legislature, and works with the Governor of New York and with State Senate to create laws and establish a budget. The Assembly's legislative authority and responsibilities include passing bills on public policy matters, setting levels for State spending, raising or lowering taxes, and voting to uphold or override gubernatorial vetoes. The 68th Assembly District covers East Harlem and parts of the Bronx. Joining us today is one of the candidates, incumbent Assemblymember Robert Rodriguez. And his challenger, John Ruiz, was unable to attend for medical reasons. Welcome. Thank you for being here, Assemblyman Rodriguez. How do you describe the major responsibilities and the role of a State Assemblymember?

R. Rodriguez: Well, I think the Assemblymember has a number of important responsibilities. One is to represent the district locally and make sure that their important resources are arriving to our community, and secondarily is to look at the bigger picture and try to find solutions to the bigger problems, not just impacting our community, but also New Yorkers across the State. And I think I've been able to do that on a number of occasions. When we look at the local initiatives, making sure that public housing begins to get the resources that it deserves. So far we've gotten about \$550,000,000.00 over the last three years to go towards housing.

R. Rodriguez: Making sure we have better parks and open space, so the Pier and the East River Esplanade, and making sure that we get resources for that. I've put \$5,000,000.00 towards the restoration of the Pier on 107th Street. And then also making sure that the Second Avenue Subway and transportation in general improves for not just the residents of our community moving up from 96th to

125th, but also thinking about creative ways to fund the entire system so that it's better for everyone with the Move New York Plan. So those are some of the local initiatives that we've undertaken that have also led its way to larger legislation. So I think being able to do those things is what makes us a good Assemblymember to say.

Julie Walker: So other than the things that you mentioned, in this last term, what were legislative accomplishments that you are most proud of, and did you have any major disappointments?

R. Rodriguez: Well, there's always major disappointments. You know, sometimes you never get as much as you'd like in a number of areas of the budget, so I would say that continues to be an area. We need more money for public housing, and even though we got almost \$1,000,000,000.00 for public education, we certainly need more resources there. But we did have a number of significant accomplishments, and one that I'm particularly proud of is making sure that we are creating opportunities for people who do not have access to retirement accounts, to be able to save for the future. We introduced this legislation two years ago under guidelines from the Obama administration that would allow us to be able to create a State-sponsored retirement program for private employers and private employees to participate in if they don't have access to 401ks through their employer.

R. Rodriguez: So really, we started with this legislation, we ran into some roadblocks in terms of directions from the Labor Department on how that could be implemented, and then we ran into a bigger roadblock with President Trump getting elected and literally the congress rolling back all of those regulations. But we persevered, we were able to craft the program in a way that it does deal with those regulations and objections, so that it clears hurdles. And we are now able and passed in our budget, along with money to fund this program, a State-sponsored retirement program for private employers and employees who don't have access to retirement systems. So that's a big policy initiative, allowing for people to save for the future so that when they hit the senior age, they're not relying on just social security, which likely will not be enough, and actually have a little bit more security in the future. So that was a big deal that took a number of years to implement that we're particularly proud of.

Julie Walker: You mentioned public housing-

R. Rodriguez: Sure.

Julie Walker: And we're gonna get back to that in a moment.

R. Rodriguez: Hope so.

Julie Walker: But in 2017, you were a Democratic candidate for the New York City Council for District 8. It was your second run, and last year you were defeated in the

primary election. You remained in the Assembly. Why did you run for City Council? Did you feel you could get more done with the City Council than as an Assemblymember?

R. Rodriguez: They're two particularly different roles. And of course, just reminding voters, it really matters to vote. That race was decided on 80 votes, so it does matter, every single vote. But particularly, I certainly thought that I could do more on the city level. It's a different pot of resources. They're able to do a number of things locally, whereas in the Assembly, a lot more of it is primarily policy-based in a number of ways, and the budgets oftentimes are decided on the state level, but then implemented oftentimes on the city level. Particularly, when you talk about areas of housing, oftentimes we'll approve our State bond cap, and the majority of that State bond cap will go to the city for affordable housing projects, and they're the ones who implement the local initiative. So it's important that we recognize that distinction, that the City Council does have a lot of opportunities around local initiatives and implementing many of the programs that are decided on the state level. And we operate much more on a policy level.

R. Rodriguez: I mean, our \$154,000,000.00 budget is extraordinarily significant in terms of setting priorities, and then the localities are responsible for implementing those. So when we talk about criminal justice reform, which I'm particularly proud of with Raise the Age and the issues around [inaudible 00:06:30], when we talk about issues around healthcare and education funding, those are things where the State plays an outsize role in. I know I can continue to do there, but I also would have offered an opportunity to do something different. So unfortunately it didn't work out, but I'm happy to be serving in the Assembly and continuing to represent my constituents, because we have a number of things that we have been successful in implementing, but they're not quite done. Hopefully we'll get to talk about the Second Avenue Subway which is one of those.

Julie Walker: We will.

R. Rodriguez: Great.

Julie Walker: But first we'll go back to the State budget which you mentioned. Do you think your district is getting its fair share of those resources?

R. Rodriguez: I will always say no, because I always believe that we should be getting more, because we are a district with significant need. I'm proud of the work that we've done to really change the way the State looks at public housing. When we started, there was a significant gap in funding from the State, where no money had been coming in for at least 12 years. Starting in 2015, we got \$100,000.00 to start investing in NYCHA, two years later, \$200,000,000.00, last year, \$250,000,000.00. So that's significant progress, but of course it's not enough. The numbers that are needed there are huge.

R. Rodriguez: We made progress. We made progress in terms of making sure that we preserve Mitchell-Lama, again, a similar situation. We started off with small funding, I think around \$15,000,000.00, and were able to grow that pot last year to \$75,000,000.00 to preserve Mitchell-Lama housing across the State, and successfully were able to do that for places like Lakeview. So I think we have been able to bring significant resources, and I know we're gonna talk about the 2nd Avenue subway later, which is probably one of the biggest accomplishments with \$1.2 billion, to begin to start that program. So we're doing fine in terms of getting our share of major projects, but is it enough? No, because the need is so significant in just three of those areas that I mentioned.

Julie Walker: So what do you think was left out of the State's \$168,000,000,000.00 budget?

R. Rodriguez: Well, I think one of the areas that we are going to see ourselves faced with, and I hope that I can continue to enhance that conversation, is transportation funding. MTA is and will continue to fall apart unless we take aggressive measures. I've been the chief advocate for the Move New York Congestion Pricing Equitable Tolling Proposal, which generates revenue, but also creates a fairer distribution of the costs associated with transit, and also raises significant amount of revenue, so I think we can get to about \$12 to \$15 billion to help fund the improvements that are necessary in [inaudible 00:08:59] Subway Action Plan and major capital projects like the Second Avenue Subway. We took a baby step last year in terms of implementing just the for hire vehicle surcharge, which was only one of the parts of the Move New York Plan that I had been championing and proposing, but I believe we are gonna come back next year and really address and fund some of the short [inaudible 00:09:23] that we're seeing with respect to the MTA. So more work to be done there.

Julie Walker: Well, we know that the lack of reliable public transportation and access to public transportation services is a serious problem in your district. According to the MTA, phase two of the Second Avenue Subway which extends the cue line three stops to 125th Street in East Harlem, is now expected to finish in late 2029. So what plans do you have to address the lack of public transportation in this district?

R. Rodriguez: So that's been a huge issue. First off, we contend that 2029 is too late. We believe that we can get it done by 2027. MTA believes that that can be moved forward, but we all have to be pushing aggressively, both on the state and federal level, to get the resources necessary to make that happen, and also looking at the issue of transit, improving bus service, and improving reliability of the subway. 80% of my residents rely on public transportation to get to doctor's appointments, or to get to work, or to get your kids to daycare. And we know that if anything were to happen on the 4, 5, and 6, which is by far the busiest train line in the system, the East Side is completely out of business, completely disconnected. People are stranded and walking to work, missing work.

R. Rodriguez: So having the redundancy, but also the access and availability, is critical to our residents, and that's why we put so much time and energy into making sure that it's funded. And that's why Move New York and that discussion is important, is we wanna fix it not just so that we get Second Avenue Subway to 125th, which is critically important, but because we deserve, and everybody deserves a better MTA with better access points, and I think we can do that with some of these resources.

Julie Walker: Let's move on to talk about Rikers Island and criminal justice reform.

R. Rodriguez: Sure.

Julie Walker: Are you for or against the closing of Rikers Island and moving the inmate population to borough-based facilities? And is 10 years too long to accomplish this?

R. Rodriguez: I think it is. I think we've recognized that there's a significant problem with Rikers Island, not that certainly requires newer and better facilities. I think they're completely outdated, and very much the way that we deal with and house people there is significantly outdated. That's why I think we begin to address the bail reform issue, because there are people there who have not been convicted of a crime, who are literally there because they can't make their bail and for minor offenses. So that's something that we tried to address this year that I think we need to continue to push to address next year. But more importantly is making sure that there's a rational position to where we move inmates so that they are in their communities, able to receive services, and in their places that are supported by the community. And I think it's important that that conversation also happened, because I think there's a significant amount of controversy about people assuming responsibility and sharing the burden.

Julie Walker: Do you have a plan to move those inmates?

R. Rodriguez: I think that is a plan that is currently ... We're still waiting to see from the city and particularly the Mayor.

Julie Walker: But do you have your own thoughts on it?

R. Rodriguez: I would say our thoughts are we ... One is to significantly reduce the population, which Raise the Age, something that we passed, begins to do, and bail reform would significantly lower that amount. I think when we look at places like our district, we have Lincoln Correctional, which if we're dealing with those minor offenders, particularly on the bail reform component, can assume a little bit more responsibility there, as well as another facility in Central Harlem up on Edgecombe that could assume some of those responsibilities. So I think from the upper Manhattan perspective, we're certainly doing that. And then I think if we were going to look at the mentally ill population that needs significant

services around that, we do have Manhattan Psych on Randalls and Wards, that is currently underutilized, that we could consider for helping to reduce that population. So that is specifically how we could address our share in my portion of the Assembly district, and I certainly would hope that the conversations in the other boroughs are hopefully as fruitful and productive as the ideas that I propose.

Julie Walker: So yes or no? Do you support Assemblymember Dan Quart's bill to end cash bail?

R. Rodriguez: I do.

Julie Walker: Okay. And let's talk about marijuana because marijuana plays into this, and the legalization. Where do you stand on the legalization on any level of marijuana?

R. Rodriguez: Now, I am for decriminalization. Legalization will take a little bit more steps. I feel the conversation that's being had right now is very much about the financial benefits associated with the legalization of marijuana. My primary concern has been around the criminal justice component. I represent an area that had the most number of stop and frisks amongst its youth population, so we have put many people through the system, many of whom were convicted for a minor violation for possession of a minor amount of marijuana, which should have been a violation under any other circumstance, so those folks had been run through the system. So I'm concerned about making sure that we decriminalize it completely, and then let's talk about how do we do that and provide some sense of justice for those people that have been targeted for almost a decade as a result of this practice. And then I'd like to have a conversation based on that viewpoint, not on the fact that this is gonna generate X amount of billions or millions of dollars in revenue for an industry that may benefit others, but has not provided any substantial benefit to my community thus far.

Julie Walker: So getting back to NYCHA, the New York City Housing Authority operates more than 15000 apartments and 21 developments in East Harlem, and that's the largest number of public housing apartment units in any of the city's community districts, and it's also a large portion of East Harlem's affordable housing stock. So the living conditions in public housing have been the subject of many investigations in the last few years, and to say that they are deplorable is not overreaching. When was the last time you were in a NYCHA apartment in your district?

R. Rodriguez: Well, that would have been a week ago, because we are out there campaigning and knocking on doors. And I was fortunate enough to have the Governor in an apartment with us, looking at the conditions in [inaudible 00:15:59] houses, in particular, looking at the level of mold, looking at how the issues are around the floors, looking at how poor the repairs are, and the timeliness in which they are being done. Literally, it's not just about the level of investment there, having been at Lehman Village last week and talking about the elevators that

consistently do not work. We could go development by development around the problems in each and every one. And having been through them, you recognize that this is a big problem that needs a big fix. And while I mentioned earlier that we've gotten half a billion dollars, or \$550,000,000.00, to begin that discussion, other parts had to be incorporated into that legislation to make it more effective, like design build so that we can maybe get these repairs and big contracts done faster, like a monitor to make sure that this money is not wasted, and we are not wasting time on change orders and all this other nonsense that tends to blow out projects and take out time. Those were part of the legislation that we passed in the budget last year.

R. Rodriguez: But more importantly is in the future. We have been fighting since the day I was elected to make sure that the State plays a more active role and steps up to investing in the tens of thousands of units I have in my district, but the 100s of thousands of residents across the city. We can't say it's somebody else's problem. They're New York City residents, New York State residents, who pay New York State taxes. So I think I wanna continue to work on a bigger picture solution that puts some significant capital to match the city's contribution in how we fix public housing, because I don't think the federal government is gonna be there, even though in this last budget they did make us a significant increase from previous budgets.

Julie Walker: So going to affordable housing, rents have increased 40% in the past three years, and private development is taking off. The city recently rezoned much of the neighborhood with plans to invest over \$200,000,000.00 and allow for the construction of nearly 3500 new apartments, about a quarter of them designated as affordable housing units. Do you support this rezoning?

R. Rodriguez: I thought the rezoning could have done better in terms of increasing the number of affordability units, and making sure that affordability is across the spectrum. And I think that's an opportunity that is lost because it's only on a conditional basis should they choose to take the increase in zoning. And what we fear in the community is that many of the folks are just gonna develop as of right. And this would be a benefit that is not taken advantage of. So I think that's one of our concerns with respect to the rezoning, and that only represents new units coming online. There are significant threats around existing affordable housing units, and that's why preserving those Mitchell-Lamas, preserving those affordable units.

R. Rodriguez: We preserved 440 units at Lakeview by making that a project-based Section 8 program so that we don't lose those units. And then over the next 20 years, keeping the 1199s and the Franklin Plazas of the world, which represent the heart of the working class community in our district. To keep that affordable is critically important, because if we lose any one of those large developments, then it will dwarf whatever we think we're gonna be creating out of that rezoning. And I think that's one of the longstanding concerns that we'll have to work through.

Julie Walker: Earlier you mentioned retirees. How do you plan on supporting the needs of the growing number of senior citizens in your district?

R. Rodriguez: I think that's where the subsidy programs become critically important. We have worked consistently to expand DRIE and to expand SCRIE, which is the Senior Citizens Rent Increase Exemption program. We've raised that threshold to \$50,000.00, which covers more seniors. I think that's gonna be another important issue is making that available for those areas that are not Section 8-based, that are not New York City Housing Development-based, where you have income subsidy. We've gotta be able to expand that potentially to other places. I was knocking on doors and I spoke with a woman at 1900 Lex, for example, and she is retiring this year. She's currently paying \$3,100.00 for a three bedroom, two bath. She knows her income is going to drop precipitously when she retires, and she is concerned about how she's gonna pay for that rent. So we have to get her SCREE, or some form of subsidy, or there is threat that she's gonna be homeless.

Julie Walker: Assemblyman Rodriguez, what is your next piece of legislation you wanna sponsor if you're voted back into office?

R. Rodriguez: So I think where we're gonna continue to work is in the Secure Choice Savings Program. I think for us to be able to get that implemented ... Again, I don't like leaving jobs half finished, and there's certainly new legislation to take on, but I have a number of things that are kind of underway. Getting the Secure Choice Savings Program up and running, and activated, and actually getting the enrollment to meet the demand, is something I wanna focus on. And then of course, MTA, the Move New York initiative, creating real, longterm funding for that, I think that will take up the majority of the legislative time, because these are great things that need to happen that I hope will happen quickly, and then we can certainly look at that. Unfortunately, still things that in my mind are not quite finished.

Julie Walker: Okay. Well, we are almost finished here, and we would like to get your closing statement.

R. Rodriguez: Well, I'm just grateful to have the opportunity to have represented East Harlem and the Upper East Side for the last eight years. Having been born and raised in East Harlem, spent my entire life there, and volunteering on the Community Board till here we are today. I'm proud of the accomplishments that we have been able to achieve, money for New York City public housing, money for affordable housing to preserve those developments that we have, expand the transportation access initiatives that are currently underway. I feel locally, like we have been able to bring significant resources to our district, as well as pass the signature items, like raising the minimum wage to \$15, making sure that there's paid family leave, and I have two children so I feel it, the impact of what making sure you have enough time to take care of your loved ones, particularly when it's most necessary for your family unit, making sure that those things are

there, raising the age of criminal responsibility so that our young people, their lives aren't ruined in jail for a mistake.

R. Rodriguez: We have done so much good work, universal pre-K, to name a few. And I could really go on and on, but really it's important about making sure that we continue the work that we're doing. I believe that we're moving in a direction where East Harlem is getting more resources. We have initiatives on their way for better parks and open space, better transportation, better and new housing, more senior developments, and I don't wanna see us lose this progress. I wanna be able to continue to build upon it, so I ask everyone to come out and vote on September 13th and support the direction moving forward.

Julie Walker: Assemblyman Rodriguez, thank you so much for being here with us.

R. Rodriguez: Thank you.

Julie Walker: And thank you for watching. Please remember to vote. Primary party elections will be held Thursday, September 13th, and the general election will be held on Tuesday, November 6th. For more information on voting, locating your poll site and all the candidates, you can visit racetorepresent.com or the League of Women Voters website, lwvny.org. Thank you for watching Race to Represent on Manhattan Neighborhood Network.