

Race To Represent 2018 : State Senate District 26 Debate

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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 an MNN election initiative.

Julie Walker: Hello. I'm Julie Walker. New Yorkers will be voting in the general election on Tuesday, November 6. They will cast their ballots for seats including governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, and the state legislature with its 150 assembly seats and 63 state senate seats.

Julie Walker: The state senate is the upper chamber of New York's legislature. Along with the assembly, it works alongside the governor to create laws and establish a state budget. Today, we bring you a debate with the candidates running for the state senate in District 26. The winner will take office in January of 2019. The 26th state senate district covers lower Manhattan, parts of western Brooklyn, and represents 317,000 residents.

Julie Walker: There are three candidates vying for this seat. The Democratic candidate, Brian Kavanaugh, and Republican candidate, Anthony Arias, are joining us today. The third challenger, Stuart Avrck, is currently out of the country and could not be at this taping.

Julie Walker: Welcome, and thank you both for joining us. We're going to start off with a lightning round, and we're going to start out with the incumbent, state senator Brian Kavanaugh. What three words would you use to describe yourself, and what makes you a better candidate for the position?

Brian Kavanaugh: I would say hardworking, integrity, and results.

Julie Walker: We're going to go to your challenger, Anthony Arias.

Anthony Arias: I would say transparent, honest, and persistent.

Julie Walker: Okay. And did I pronounce your last name correctly?

Anthony Arias: Yes.

Julie Walker: All right, great, Mr. Arias. We'll stick with you for this next question. What are the two biggest issues facing your district, and what plans do you have to address these issues?

Anthony Arias: I would say the two biggest issues affecting our district are the overdevelopment that has led to the displacement of affordable housing and small businesses and resiliency issues and the MTA. And I think a lot of the things that we should start focusing in on to combat that, I would say, is looking at the tax abatement 4201A law. I think that we need to review, if not repeal it, and then find something that can replace it that incentivizes developers coming into our area on small business spaces and affordable housing low and middle income. I don't think that our district needs any more luxury towers at this point. We need to focus on keeping the fabric of our communities intact, and then from repealing the 4201A law with the tax expenditure that would not be coming into the city, be able to create a lockbox to fund resiliency projects on both sides of the district, in particular the Big U, which hasn't been funded since Hurricane Sandy, has come in and it's been over six years now.

Anthony Arias: And as far as the MTA is concerned, we need to go through and transparently and immediately fund the system-wide upgrades that the city desperately needs to get the trains to run on time, to be able to move the new population that's coming into the area, to support the developments that are coming in. Hopefully, the new type of affordable housing type of developments that we need here, that will then also be able to take a lot of the congestion off of our streets.

Julie Walker: We're going to dive deeper into a lot of things that you brought up, but first we're going to go to you, Mr. Kavanagh. What are the two issues that face your district that you think are the biggest, and how do you plan on fixing them?

Brian Kavanagh: I'm going to largely agree with Anthony about what the issues are. First, housing affordability. And it's not just the overdevelopment. It is the continuous threat that our weak rent laws, the rent stabilization laws, cause for people who have lived in our communities, who have built these communities, and are threatened with displacement. Also, public housing, we have a very large number of public housing residents in our district, and that system, of course, is in real crisis. So looking at housing affordability across the district ... It's an issue I've worked on for many years in Albany and hope to make huge strides in in upcoming sessions, especially if we get a Democratic majority in the Senate.

Brian Kavanagh: And transportation infrastructure. It's the terrible crisis in the MTA, which is both a funding crisis and a management crisis, and we face it particularly in this district with the shutdown of the L train, which is going to require enormous adjustments, and we've been working very hard to make sure that plan is going to meet the needs of New Yorkers, people who live in the district, and the many, many people who rely on that line, and at the same time, we are gearing up for the reconstruction of the BQE in Brooklyn. The first public presentation of the

options for that enormous project is occurring today and the day we're taping this, and again, that is an infrastructure challenge that is going to require great creativity and a lot of patience on the part of people that live in the district.

Julie Walker: Again, we're going to get to most of those issues in a minute, but you both brought up a lot of fixes. So the state has \$168 billion budget. What one issue would you like to see get more funding? We'll stay with you, Mr. Kavanagh.

Brian Kavanagh: If I had to choose, I would say the transit system, which is the principal responsibility of the state, but I'll just put in a quick plug for additional funding for public housing, which is something I've fought for for many years. On the transit system, it is clear that that system has suffered for many, many years now from disinvestment, so you have signal systems that don't work, you have trains that just cannot run on time ... It's not just the train, it's the underlying structure. We need to rebuild that system. It is the lifeblood of this city. It's what keeps us and allows us to get home at night, get to school, get to work, and it's what makes this city livable and vibrant, and it is ... More and more people are looking for alternatives to that system, because it just doesn't get them where they need to go reliably, and we need enormous, immediate infusions of capital.

Brian Kavanagh: I have voted, as an assembly member, for various substantial increases in funding. I've been a long-time supporter of congestion pricing as a means, both of addressing traffic congestion and as a resource for public transit. And again, I think that's a fight that we need to address now.

Julie Walker: Mr. Arias?

Anthony Arias: I'm not going to disagree with Senator Kavanagh on that. I would say that the transit system is the most immediate need that needs to be fixed, and then a plug for affordable housing, but aside from just throwing money at the problem, I think we need to go through and review the bureaucracy, and what are the issues that have allowed such deterioration to happen within the affordable housing and transit system, so that we don't have the system fail us again in the next 50 or 100 years.

Anthony Arias: So I'm in favor of finding more funding for all of that, and one of the things even before the transit system is looking at implementing emissions credit for the MTA to help fund not just the updates of the entire infrastructure, but the expansion that the city needs. I know we're talking about extending the Second Avenue subway line, DeBlasio's talking about putting in the streetcars through Brooklyn and Queens, which some of the funding from emissions credits could help go to, but I think we need to prioritize updating the entire infrastructure, not just the subways, but the highways and the roads that we have here so that we can have commerce continue to flow freely and that can support small businesses in the area and can support easy transit for our residents to be able to get to work on time.

Anthony Arias: And then also be able to make sure that we have enough available for affordable housing, looking at a reform of the system.

Julie Walker: Let's stick with the transit issue, and we'll stick with you, Mr. Arias. The next year, the L train between Brooklyn and Manhattan shuts down for about 15 months. About 400,000 people take that train every day for work. What can you do, if elected, to help alleviate the situation that that would cause, with the shutdown of the L train?

Anthony Arias: It's unfortunate that's going to be shut down. However, there's no other way around it. We just have to all suck it up and deal with it for the next 15 months, and hopefully, it does get done in 15 months. What we could do, if I become the senator for this district, is to be that loud voice for the city to help mitigate a lot of the alternative routes that the city is currently planning with the DOT for the new bus routes, making sure that we do have clean buses that can efficiently move the 400,000 people a day ... Not just across the Williamsburg bridge, but also focusing on commuting them to the other nearby subway stations to alleviate some of that pressure, and then making sure that those buses that we do have on the road are not going to be in violation of the Clean Air Act, so we also have to make sure that our environment is still intact after 15 months of having buses running through our streets.

Anthony Arias: And making sure that those buses ... Some of them can be more than a minute an hour, some cases aren't going to be affecting the small business community around there, that's going to deter people and residents from going in and shopping.

Julie Walker: And just quickly, Mr. Arias, your opinion or your position on congestion pricing, because that plays a part in this, as well.

Anthony Arias: I'm against congestion pricing. I believe that that's another tax on New Yorkers, and seeing as how New Yorkers are already very heavily taxed, I'm against it, and I don't believe that congestion pricing is ... It's just a symptom of the problem. It's not solving what the issues are. And the issue, I say, is looking at the entire transit system and infrastructure that we have in place. That needs to be reviewed first. Let's go through the bureaucracy and figure out where some of the redundancies are that we can get rid of to make the system more efficient, to make our dollars go a lot further, and then update the signal system, update the whole subway system, make them ADA compliant, make sure that the runways ... Not the runways, sorry ... That the highways are up to code, so that we can have commerce and people running around the city.

Anthony Arias: And I think if we can get all that up in place, with clean energy, that congestion will alleviate itself naturally.

Julie Walker: Okay. Mr. Kavanagh, the L train issue. How do you tackle that?

Brian Kavanagh: We began more than a year ago pushing the MTA and the city DOT to get out into the communities and begin the process of both educating people about what's coming and also hearing from them about what they need during this very difficult time. It begins in April 2019. It'll be a 15-month period. We have made real progress in making the plan make sense, but there's still a lot of work to do. We want to make sure that they are planning routes for people around the clock, not just during rush hour. This is, as you mentioned, a very busy line. The L train by itself would be one of the largest transit systems in the United States, just by its own ridership. So it's a huge endeavor. We want to make sure that the routes are tested and available before the shutdown, so people can begin to explore their options and get where they're going, and also so the city and the state can work out any problems that may arise.

Brian Kavanagh: We want to make sure that we do any digging necessary on these bus routes before the shutdown, so short of a real dire emergency, we're not disrupting routes. There are many agencies and private entities that dig up the streets a lot. We see that all the time, so make sure that's not going to disrupt these new critical routes.

Brian Kavanagh: Mr. Arias mentioned electric buses, so it's a big challenge. It's a failure of our transit industry nationally that electric buses with no emissions are not more available, but we're pushing for as many of those as possible. At the same time, we need to look at other modes. We're pushing for as many bikes available as possible to go over the Williamsburg bridge. We're pushing for the maximum improvement in the other transit lines. We're pushing for an issue that hasn't been mentioned, the two-way tolling of the Verrazzano Bridge. We're currently pushing a lot of traffic across Manhattan unnecessarily.

Julie Walker: And just quickly, congestion pricing. Quickly, please.

Brian Kavanagh: I support the Move New York Fair plan, which is a comprehensive revisioning of the tolling system around the metropolitan area. It would put a third of that money into improving the roads. It's fair to New Yorkers. It lowers the tolls on some bridges, and it would generate an enormous amount of revenue that we desperately need to keep both our highway infrastructure and our transit system operating.

Julie Walker: Okay. Sticking with transportation, the BQE which you mentioned before, and we'll stick with you, Mr. Kavanagh, where do you stand on the various plans to repair the BQE?

Brian Kavanagh: We're in the very early stages. We had a great success earlier in this year passing something the city had sought for a long time called Design Build Authority. It allows them to do, in a single contract the design and the construction for the project. It'll take at least two years off the project and permit the city to be creative in how they do this. Just this week, the city is starting to articulate what those plans might look like, and we need to hear

from the community. There are no genuinely good options. This is going to be a six or eight or perhaps longer, six or eight year, perhaps longer project. It is going to be disruptive, but we're trying to figure out ways to make sure that we minimize the disruption, not just in the neighborhood, but in the metropolitan area and ensure that we mitigate where we can. But it's going to be a very challenging project.

Julie Walker: Of the two plans, do you have a preference? Because one shuts down the Promenade, but is six years. The other-

Brian Kavanagh: Again, the DOT is currently focusing on a big question about whether to basically build a temporary roadway over the existing roadway. That would require taking the Promenade out of service for a number of years. The alternative is a very large, perhaps endless construction site directly outside of the Brooklyn Heights section, where the Promenade is. I think neither of those is desirable. We're just beginning this conversation, and the community needs to be heard. And we obviously also need to hear more from the DOT about the engineering challenges and the benefits in terms of cost and timing of that. But the plan that does not involve taking the Promenade out of service is expected to be at least two years longer, perhaps longer, and might have traffic backups as much as 12 miles away in each direction from the construction site, so these are difficult trade-offs, and we're at the very beginning, and again, we've encouraged the DOT as they are doing to get out into the community and explore this.

Julie Walker: Yes or no? You haven't committed to either plan.

Brian Kavanagh: Clearly. These plans are, at this moment, about 160 hours old, and we are just at the beginning of this process.

Julie Walker: Mr. Arias, your ideas for the BQE and the two plans being floated?

Anthony Arias: I know that the plans are new. However, I am in favor of the more innovative approach, where we could lift the highway, build the new highway above the old one. Unfortunately, it would take the Promenade out for a number of years, but so far, if that might be the shorter, cheaper option, that might mitigate a lot of the traffic, then I'm in favor of all that, because not only will we have traffic 12 miles in either direction of the BQE, but what is the economic loss that we have there. So as much as the DOT can to mitigate that, perhaps doing something like this that's more innovative would be the best option to move forward. But at the end of the day, what we need to have is community input, and we need to have representatives that go out there and push the DOT and the engineers to sit down and talk with all of the local community groups to get their input. Ultimately, at the end of the day, to get to see what it is that they want, and then speak on behalf of what the people want.

Julie Walker: Another big issue in your district, affordable housing. The city controller, Scott Stringer, released a report stating that since 2005, the city lost more than a million affordable apartments, and those are the ones that are under \$900. I'm not sure who's living in New York City for under \$900, but apartments costing more than \$2700 have ballooned. So as a state senator, what steps would you take to increase the city's stock of affordable housing in your district, and how would you work to slow the disappearance of rent regulated units? We'll stick with you, Mr. Arias.

Anthony Arias: Sure. So one, we need to review all of the rent control laws. I believe that they are outdated and cumbersome. And any time that we try to overcomplicate things, it just becomes more expensive and ends up doing more harm than good. I think one of the first steps that we could take in terms of affordable housing is one, I believe they need to get rid of 421a, which is the tax abatement, along as the developer gives 25% to affordable housing. But I say we have enough luxury spaces right now, so if you can get rid of that, we'll stem the tide of new developers coming in here, and instead replace them and incentivize them with focusing on low- and middle-income housing.

Anthony Arias: And then as far as the rent control laws, I think we should just make it a blanket across the board that's similar to what we have with the public housing and make the rent pegged to a percentage of your annual income, of the household's income for that year, to then not just have new developments coming in, but also for the current landlords that are here in the city, incentivize and say, well, you know, the average income for New York City is 30 grand, so we want affordable housing to be considered \$1000 a month.

Anthony Arias: And so if you were able to do \$1000 a month, well, then, we'll give you x amount of a break on your property taxes to offset some of those losses, and therefore incentivize you to come in and bring in affordable spaces, and then for those that want to keep the \$2700 or more at that point, they don't get any tax benefit from it. They just pay their fair share in the tax, we'd have enough of those types of spaces, we'd want to focus on using the government to be good and incentivize the right type of housing that we need.

Julie Walker: Mr. Kavanagh?

Brian Kavanagh: So first of all, the \$900 threshold is basically what is considered affordable for a family with a household income of about \$36,000. That's slightly below the median household income in New York, but many, many families are indeed trying to live in the city on \$36,000, and those are the folks that keep our businesses running and keep our government agencies running, as well, so it's critical that we ensure that we have people that can continue to afford to live, not just in the outskirts of the city, but in all our neighborhoods, including the 26th Senate District.

Brian Kavanagh: I'm going to disagree with Mr. Arias a little bit here. I don't think the problem with the rent laws is their complexity. I think the problem is that Republicans in Albany have fought again and again and again to keep those laws weak to make sure that they don't adequately protect tenants. We need to repeal all the provisions of those laws that allow units to be deregulated, that in effect make apartments more valuable to landlords if they can make them vacant rather than having them occupied. Landlords are making plenty of money in legitimate ways by maintaining housing and renting them to people at very generous rents that are available to them. We need to stop deregulating those units so that we can stop the bleeding.

Brian Kavanagh: This is the Senate district in the state that has lost more rent regulated housing in the last decade than any other Senate district in the state, and I've fought that fight in 2011, 2007, 2011, 2015, as a state assembly member. I'm very much looking forward to fighting that fight and hoping that will have a different outcome in part because I believe we have an opportunity for Democrats to control the Senate.

Julie Walker: Just quickly, I don't think we heard you on 421a. Did you respond? Are you for, against?

Brian Kavanagh: Okay. 421a is a city tax benefit that goes to landlords. It is way overly generous. We get very little affordability out of it. The taxpayers of the city forgo a lot of revenue. It is the Republican Conference of the Senate that fought to make that program the very generous program that it is. I am not supportive of 421a.

Julie Walker: Okay. Let's move on to resiliency, and we'll stay with you, Mr. Kavanagh. Your district is severely affected by storms, especially superstorms. What initiatives or legislation have you in mind to protect your district from future storms?

Brian Kavanagh: I was in office when Sandy hit. I was part of a team of elected officials with community people that were on the front lines in making sure that we addressed the immediate concerns of people. That was basically a relief effort. We had enormous numbers of people stranded in high-rise buildings with no power and with limited services. So I am very familiar with the challenges that that poses. We have begun, especially on the Lower East Side, where there's a great deal of need after Sandy, a process that identifies the social infrastructure and the resources necessary to be resilient in the event of the inevitable storms that are coming in the future. At the same time, we are looking in many places at physical barriers that will keep the storm surge out. We've had great success on the East Side. The hospitals and the power plant that went down and caused all the chaos after Sandy have now been reinforced.

Brian Kavanagh: We've got the East Side Coastal Resiliency project, which is an intent to build a very long barrier in various ways along the way. That is a project that is still in need of additional funding but is moving forward. We also need to understand that in some places, you are going to have some flooding. It is simply not the

case ... You might be able to keep a storm surge out. You're not going to keep the rain out, so we need to make sure our infrastructure is prepared for that, that we have redundancies, and that we do what we can to be ready for that and get back up and running as soon as possible.

Brian Kavanagh: One more thing, there is the Army Corps of Engineers is studying the possibility of a harbor-wide protection system. This would be a barrier out at the mouth of the harbor, and the other places where the sea meets New York City's inland waterways. That is long overdue. We need the Army Corps of Engineers to get that done so we know whether that is a feasible option.

Julie Walker: Mr. Arias?

Anthony Arias: Yeah, so the big thing that we need to focus on in the area is developing the Big U, as Senator Kavanagh was mentioning before, and we need to come up with funding that can immediately address those issues. Superstorm Sandy was over six years ago now, or about six years ago now, and very little has been done to do it, and I would say that a lot of the development that's been coming in here has made things worse, if and when another storm does come into the area. The state needs to be more proactive in terms of finding the funding and putting it into a lockbox.

Anthony Arias: One of the things why I disagree with repealing of the 421a, that costs the city almost \$1.5 billion a year in expenditures. A portion of that could then be used to help fund a lot of these projects, and not just the Big U, but all the resiliency projects on the Manhattan and Brooklyn side of the district to prevent any surges in storms. I'm not saying that we're going to have 100%, but we need to do everything that we can to make sure that not only do we have the necessary infrastructure in place to stop against that flooding from storms, but make sure that the new infrastructure that we do put in here isn't going to be affected, make sure that the L train shutdown doesn't happen again, and that it's properly developed so that it can withstand large storms, such as Sandy, and that any new developments coming into the area are primed for such flooding in the event that the systems do fail, God forbid, and at the end of the day, be able to make sure that that's the number one priority for anything new coming into this city.

Anthony Arias: I think that the state Senate should be more proactive in terms of being able to accomplish that.

Julie Walker: Okay. The Reproductive Health Act bill is currently stalled in the state senate. That bill would legalize abortion in New York, if the Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade. What is your position on that bill, and would you vote yes or no? We'll stay with you, Mr. Arias, and then we'll move on to you, Mr. Kavanagh.

Anthony Arias: I would vote yes. I'm a pro-choice Republican, so I'm not going to sit here and try to tout party lines. No, there are a lot of things that I disagree with that the

Republican party has done, such as the 421a laws, and this is going back and listening to what the people of our community need and what the city and state want, and as an elected representative, I'm not here to push forward my agenda or the party's agenda. I'm here to push forward the people's agenda. So in that case ... Now I do believe that people should have the right to choose what they want to do, and I don't believe that the government should have any right to say what a woman does with her body, so I would be 100% in favor of passing that.

Julie Walker: Mr. Kavanagh?

Brian Kavanagh: I'm glad to hear that. I think that Mr. Arias would be among the first Republicans to vote that way if he were to get to the Senate and do that. I'm a member of the Bipartisan Pro-Choice Caucus, and I think it is a surprising fact that we need to codify the laws that have been the law of the land for many decades, because we effectively never bothered to change them in New York because the Supreme Court made a clear decision many years ago. I think it is important that we do that, and I voted for it in the assembly, and I'll continue to vote for it in the Senate.

Julie Walker: Okay. I believe we have time for just one more quick question, the legalization of marijuana. Where do you stand on that? Mr. Kavanagh.

Brian Kavanagh: I think it's important that we decriminalize and do it properly, and I think some states have rushed to do it in a very rapid way. New York has some of the most restrictive laws now. We still have far too many people getting involved in the criminal justice system as a result of possession and display of very minor amounts of marijuana. We have one of the most restrictive healthcare uses of marijuana laws as well. So we definitely need to liberalize that, and I think it's important that we immediately decriminalize that stuff. That is something that can be done without state legislation, and ultimately, we should go to full legalization.

Julie Walker: Mr. Arias?

Anthony Arias: I'm for legalization of marijuana across the board. I think that the city and New York in general need an influx of new businesses and a new industry coming in here that has been overregulated and that has left. And I think that it would be great to also have that become a new source of tax revenue for the city that could then be earmarked for certain projects that are necessary across the state, and a portion of that tax revenue could be to help fund some of the resiliency projects that we have here that we need to have done immediately or even to help fund the MTA and other transportation infrastructure systems here and even help to offset some of the costs for fares here in the city for our citizens.

Julie Walker: Okay. It's time now for closing statements, and Anthony Arias, you are the Republican challenger for the state Senate seat. Your closing statement.

Anthony Arias: I want to become your elected representative because I feel that with my experience as a business owner and as a community leader in Manhattan for over six years now, I have new ideas and a fresh face and persistent attitude to get your job done, to get your voice heard in the Senate, and to become a bipartisan force that's not going to sit here and just tout party lines, but tout state lines, and be somebody that can work across the aisle to find collaborative, long-term solutions that aren't going to be mired in political talk, but be mired in what is the best interest for the community based off of constant collaboration and feedback from you, the people. And as your senator, I would be somebody that would never stop fighting to be that voice for you in Albany.

Julie Walker: State senator Brian Kavanagh, please give us your closing statement.

Brian Kavanagh: First of all, I'd like to thank you for moderating today, thank the Manhattan Neighborhood Network and the League of Women Voters and all the organizations involved in sponsoring today's debate, and I'd like to thank my opponent, Mr. Arias, for joining us today, as well. New York and the nation really face a very big challenge right now. I think New Yorkers are very legitimately concerned about what's coming out of Washington, a set of values that are reflected in the Republican leadership in the White House that are not the values that we need reflected in our government here in New York. Fortunately, there's been a lot of energy around resisting that, not just by joining protests and other forms of resistance, but getting involved in the electoral system and electing people who are prepared to hold our government accountable and do the right thing.

Brian Kavanagh: We have an opportunity in New York to play a role in taking back the Congress so the president can be held accountable, but more importantly perhaps, we have an opportunity to set New York's government on the right path. The issues we've talked about today, I would add gun violence prevention, reform in our election laws and our campaign finance laws to the issues we've spoken about. Housing and our infrastructure crisis really do need solutions at the state level. I have spent 12 years working with these communities, in Albany, first as an assembly member and most recently as a senator, and I look forward to working very hard and continuing to serve you.

Julie Walker: Thank you both very much. And thank you for watching. Please remember to vote. The general election is on Tuesday, November 6. 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.