

Race To Represent 2018 State Assembly District 71 Democratic Primary Debate

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Moderator: Elinor Tatum

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Elinor Tatum: Manhattan Neighborhood Network in partnership with the League of Women Voters of New York State and the Amsterdam News presents Race to Represent, an MNN election initiative.

Elinor Tatum: I'm Elinor Tatum, publisher and editor in chief of the New York Amsterdam News. New Yorkers will be voting in state party primary elections on Thursday September 13th for seats including governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general and the state legislature with its 63 state senate seats and 150 assembly seats.

Elinor Tatum: The state assembly is the lower house of the New York State legislature. Alongside the state senate it forms the legislative branch of the New York State government and works with the governor to craft and change laws and establish a state budget.

Elinor Tatum: Today we bring you a debate among the Democratic candidates for the state assembly in district 71, which covers Upper Manhattan and includes portions of Harlem, Hamilton Heights, Sugar Hill, and Washington Heights.

Elinor Tatum: The Democratic candidates joining us today are incumbent assembly member Al Taylor, and challenger Guillermo Perez. The third Democratic candidate Luis Tejada declined our invitation. Welcome. We'll start with you assemblyman Taylor. How would you describe the job of state assemblyman and what do you believe are the most important aspects of being an assembly member?

Al Taylor: I describe it as exciting. It's an opportunity to serve your constituents and it's important to hear from all of your constituents from one end of the community to the next. What works on one block could be slightly different from the next one. The needs they vary based on the region of your district that you're in. I love it.

Al Taylor: I've served for eight months, and I look forward to doing it for another 80 years if my constituent base will allow me to do it.

Elinor Tatum: In that short time what are the top two or three things that you have accomplished?

Al Taylor: I was able to pass legislation which would allow the Division of Housing and Community Renewal and judges to go back beyond four years to look at landlords' records to see if in fact the increases that they're asking for are justified. That's one of the pieces.

Al Taylor: The other one was I passed a piece, well, I'm sorry, I introduced a piece of legislation called Elijah's Law, which deals with daycare and facilities such as that, when children are there that the workers are prepared and understand and can distinguish when a child is having an asthma attack versus a food allergy attack, and being able to service them appropriately.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you Mister Taylor. Mister Perez, what are one or two things that you've accomplished in your professional career that prepares you for a position as assembly member?

Guillermo Perez: Well, thank you for the invitation. One of the things that really motivated me to run for the assembly is the need that we have in our community on housing. Since I have a great experience on real estate management and at the same time as a community organizer with tenant association and as a landlord liaison between tenants and landlord, that is one of the main things that have motivated me.

Guillermo Perez: The second thing is the youth situation going on in our community.

Elinor Tatum: How do you define the role of assembly member?

Guillermo Perez: I define the work as an assemblyman is just they are the ear, the voice, and the eyes of the community in order to represent the community and bills that will benefit the community. I believe an assemblyman should be in direct contact with the community and at the same time a connection between all the other elected officials in order to create the best program in benefit of the community.

Elinor Tatum: This next question we'll start with you Mister Perez. New York State has \$168 billion budget. Do you think the district is getting a fair share of those resources?

Guillermo Perez: I don't think so. I don't think so. The reason why is because if we look at the numbers, the New York State Assembly has been composed by 150 assemblymen. Just looking at the numbers, we only have right now 12 latinos assemblymen, and at the same time our community has been composed by a majority latinos. We need more people involved in order to get better proposals and better budgets to our communities and our programs.

Elinor Tatum: What do you think about what the district is actually getting?

Al Taylor: Well, \$168 billion budget. There were more things we would have liked to see happen in our districts. I think the assembly passed an aggressive budget, and there were some things that we wanted to see happen in our communities that didn't take place because it got stalled in the senate.

Al Taylor: At this juncture at least when we were in session the senate had folks that were Democrats that had gone over to work with the Republicans, and the Democratic budget that we passed in the assembly didn't get through. We had the numbers in the senate. However, they chose to work with the Republicans and align themselves.

Al Taylor: A lot of things that we could have brought into our communities and to the city as a whole and be progressive were stalled in the senate because of the composition of the IDC members, the independent Democrats who voted with Republicans, and they represent our communities, one of which represents the district in which I work in.

Al Taylor: We could have gotten a little bit more, but it didn't happen because of that very reason.

Elinor Tatum: What was left out?

Al Taylor: I think when we looked at bail reform, we wanted to put more money there. We wanted to put more money in housing. I think we put \$250 billion into NYCHA, but that was just a drop in the bucket because-

Elinor Tatum: 250 million.

Al Taylor: \$250 million dollars went to NYCHA. A boiler costs almost \$2 million to replace these boilers. The infrastructure in our public housing is shot out, and there's not enough resources going in. We weren't waiting for the mayor to put all the money in, but we actually stepped up and put money into NYCHA so that people could get heat immediately and not wait six years down the road for that money to trickle in.

Al Taylor: We could have gotten more money for NYCHA and a few other different places. It just escapes me at this point where some of that other money would have gone.

Elinor Tatum: Mister Perez, what would you do differently with the budget if you were an assembly person?

Guillermo Perez: What I would do is there are a lot of damages done to the community because the IDC situation with some elected officials on our area that are just brought to the attention that we are missing part of the budget to be exactly allocated on

area like housing, elderly people, more jobs for the community, and at the same time working on health. We need more money to work on health plans.

Guillermo Perez: It is about we need to concentrate on giving the community, the people participation on making decisions. One of the things I will do different is let's say a housing committee at the assembly, why can we not bring that committee to the community and use college auditoriums, churches, public school to have an open discussion with the community and make better decision with the budget?

Elinor Tatum: Mister Taylor, what are some of the major issues facing the district, the top three that you're hearing from your constituents when you talk to them on the street?

Al Taylor: Employment, housing, and education. To my colleague's point, HDFCs are in dire need of help. I am a member of the housing committee and I hear and I understand the needs, and serving, prior to becoming an assemblyman, serving for the former assembly member Denny Farrell, I worked with housing issues.

Al Taylor: Right now there is a move to dislocate elderly folks, so there is always a fight. There's not enough legal representation when our folks are going into housing court. That's another issue there, but housing is one of the paramount issues that we're having problems with.

Elinor Tatum: Do you have proposals that are in the pipeline to address those issues?

Al Taylor: I'm having a hearing. Let me correct that. I can't have a hearing because I'm in a campaign mode. I'm having a listening forum where folks are going to talk to us about some of the issues. I'm soliciting information this Monday, I believe it's the 27th of August where HDFC folks that are in foreclosure, I'm inviting those folks into a room and we're going to have one of three series where we're going to talk about how we can help them stave off.

Al Taylor: I live in a HDFC, and my HDFC survived. We just got out of foreclosure because the attorney was very adamant about doing the work. You have folks that have invested in places for over 20 years when it wasn't sexy to live in Harlem and remain in some of these places, and now we're finding that it's difficult to remain because the city wants to take them back and give them to landlords or developers for a dollar, so we're fighting.

Elinor Tatum: Do you have any specific proposals right now?

Al Taylor: Yes. I want to have hearing ... I sit on the banking. The idea is to gather this information and then bring banks to a formal hearing to understand how they're able to sell and move properties that are HDFCs that are actually in foreclosure. They're in court, but the banks are still allowed to sell and move the property along as, what do you call, collateral damages. They're selling the property and the tenants are still fighting to maintain their rights.

Al Taylor: I want to do hearings which is why we're doing the forums. I hope I answered that.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you. Yes.

Al Taylor: Thank you.

Elinor Tatum: Mister Perez, the same question. What are you hearing from the people of district 71 and what do you think the top issues are facing the district? Do you have any proposals for addressing those issues?

Guillermo Perez: Yes. One of the things we've been doing is meeting with group of people throughout the district and listening to different requests that they have and some complaints. That is the reason why we're planning to organize having a block president, having people in the community that will meet with the assemblyman every 60 days or every 90 days.

Guillermo Perez: We're going to have an open forum with the community and listen to the different issues that we have in the community, follow up and the next meeting bring response on those questions. I believe that there should be better communication with our neighbors, our tenants, small business people. It's just about communication.

Elinor Tatum: As in most neighborhoods in Manhattan you can't help but see all the storefronts that are closed, the businesses that are going out of business. How do you suggest a plan to attract and keep local businesses open and new businesses starting?

Al Taylor: To my colleague's point, for the last two months we've been having open mobile office. Every Thursday from 4:00 to 6:00 I'm somewhere in the community with my staff hearing from the constituents to find out what their needs are. I see those abandoned stores, or closed down.

Al Taylor: It's more a city matter than it is a state, but we're arguing with those same landlords. For example, I mentioned earlier that I passed legislation that talked about going back to see if a landlord has properly charged a tenant for a service in looking for an increase. I think there is a relationship between landlords holding for the box stores to come in as opposed to keeping the little ones.

Al Taylor: For example, we had Coogan's, which we still have Coogan's restaurant in our district, which was about to close about six, seven months ago because the landlords were raising the money, raising the price of the real estate. It's how do you get the real estate folks which are sitting on the other side of the aisle to understand that these are creating problems in our district, but it's more city than it is a state issue.

Elinor Tatum: Mister Perez.

Guillermo Perez: My point is you just mentioned that you believe it is more a city issue. That is my problem. My problem is that when we as elected officials, if I become elected, I'm the elected official and the assemblyman, the next assemblyman one of the things I'm going to do is it doesn't matter if that is a city issue. We need to work together as an elected official.

Guillermo Perez: We have representative. We have a state senator. We have the assemblymen, we have city council. You know, "Oh, from that line that is district 72. I don't get involved with 71 because that is 72." Issues are issues. If we work together, we create a plan together, I believe result will be much better and faster.

Guillermo Perez: Dealing with the small businesses, all those gate down, a store for rent, you walk the community, you walk 71 district and you will see, every day you see one new store closed, two more store closed. What are we doing? We do have law in order to support the small business owners how to protect themselves in front of landlords. The thing is that we are not doing what we're supposed to do.

Guillermo Perez: Creating new law. I don't think we need to create new laws. The laws are there. One thing we should do is how can we reduce our property taxes? Can we do something?

Al Taylor: If I can weigh in on that. It's not just an issue in the 71st. I know Borough President Gale Brewer has a whole litany of the closings that are throughout the borough of Manhattan. When I say it's not a state, it is a city, and I'm always willing to work alongside with my colleagues wherever I can delve in. I'm not going to sit here and give you some information or insight on something that I don't do.

Al Taylor: I work well with Gale Brewer the borough president who has a running, but it's systemic. It's not just the 71st, 72nd. All through Manhattan we're finding, and the West Side it's the same problem. I had a conversation with Mister Greg Bishop, Gregory Bishop who is commissioner for small business. We're going to do a workshop to address some of those businesses in our community to try to stave off those that are having their gates closed.

Al Taylor: You're right, it's important that we work together. I'm one person willing to talk and work with everyone. Sorry.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you very much.

Al Taylor: Thank you.

Elinor Tatum: We're going to jump to another topic now. Currently New York State law does not adequately protect a woman's right to access safe and legal abortions. Our only protection comes from the United States Supreme Court decision that

Donald Trump, Mike Pence, and the GOP have vowed to overturn. That puts our fundamental reproductive rights at risk.

Elinor Tatum: The fact that state assembly passed a bill to fix this, it's called the Reproductive Health Act, RHA, and it would write into New York State law a woman's right to access abortion that is consistent with Roe versus Wade. Where do you stand on New York Reproductive Health Act?

Al Taylor: It's codified with the state, so I have no problems with it.

Elinor Tatum: Mister Perez.

Guillermo Perez: At the same time, I am the same position. I believe that women have the right to make decisions. Now, I believe that we should follow the law, we should follow the law and make sure it's done properly based on the law.

Elinor Tatum: I'm not sure what your point is there.

Guillermo Perez: I agree with women have the right to make a decision what they want to do with their body. Now, the thing is that it has to be done based on the law, that we have to make sure it's done properly, that we have to make sure we are accomplishing with the regulation.

Elinor Tatum: You agree with the state laws and the Reproductive Health Act that has been passed in New York State.

Guillermo Perez: I do.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you. MTA and transportation. We're going to jump there now. Ideas on how to repair the failing system and make it better to serve your district. Thoughts, Mister Taylor.

Al Taylor: Congestion pricing comes to mind, and I think that may be a viable solution, which I'm ready to support provided I can understand the details of what that would look like. There have been a couple of conversations, so I know livery are paying a little bit more money right now, and the city just did legislation that caps how many folks can come in right now, so they're not bringing any more Lyfts or Ubers, so that's good.

Al Taylor: The idea is how do we bring more revenue to help MTA. Are you going to charge the people in Brooklyn when they cross the bridge? Are you going to charge the people from the Bronx when they cross the bridge or Queens? It has to be meshed out, and I think that's going to be the best way to underwrite the support that's needed to do MTA.

Al Taylor: I actually made it here in 20 minutes. I was surprised today, because the trains don't always go as quickly as they need to, and/or they're overcrowded. I ended

up in a nice car. It was comfortable. I couldn't believe it this morning, and I was here in 15 minutes, maybe 20 at most. Putting more money in from the state but also I think the city needs to carry their share of it.

Al Taylor: It could probably use a little bit more hands on, if you would, to make sure that resources that are going in are going directly to fix the problems that need to be fixed and not administrative costs or anything like that.

Elinor Tatum: Mister Perez.

Guillermo Perez: I agree with my colleague, as you know, and Taylor. One thing is that I do believe they have enough money. I do believe it's a serious situation going on right now not only throughout the city, traffic, but at the same time we walk the district, in our district the 71 you see there are some train station under renovation.

Guillermo Perez: You ask me the question were the people, neighbors in the area informed about closing train station before they did? No. Nobody knew. I participated in the press conference on 110 Street and Columbus Avenue a few month ago where we have a lot of handicapped people coming and complaining about repairing train station, about traffic, about accommodating our neighbors throughout the city. It's something that they're not paying attention.

Guillermo Perez: At the same time, they're not giving the community the opportunity to make decision and bring suggestion to the state and the city. I believe a better communication should be arrive.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you. Now, we're going to go to rezoning. The city Department of Housing, Preservation, and Development with others unveiled an anti-displacement initiative focusing on vulnerable residents in Washington Heights and other areas targeted by developers ripe for rezoning. How are you planning to protect the residents of your district from displacement?

Al Taylor: Well, that actually happened at the Inwood part of Manhattan. I support the community's position that they didn't want it, don't want it. I'm advocating all the time, fighting for quality and affordable housing, and even if we can build some more without displacing the people that are here. I grew up in Harlem. I grew up in this city, and even in the Inwood section, and fighting every day to make sure that we don't lose what we currently have.

Al Taylor: There's legislation that I've put forward that would help us to go back and look at this again and say, "How can we do what we're doing differently or do better so that we can maintain?" It's not only just bringing new housing, but maintaining what we currently have so that people aren't being displaced.

Elinor Tatum: Mister Perez.

Guillermo Perez: I am 100% with the movement New York's not for Sale. We say that it's not really on district 71 that what is happening right now, but I agree that we should take care of this, because we're losing a lot of people in our community, minority people and middle class people that are losing their apartments. Right now this is going on on that area. At the same time, we have to prevent that keep happening, and we need more money for more apartments.

Guillermo Perez: We need more housing improvement in our community. Today it's happening in Dyckman area, and it's happening in that zone, but that is coming throughout the city, especially in Harlem, especially in Upper Manhattan and we have to take care of this. I am very disappointed with what's going on right now in there.

Elinor Tatum: Do you see the legislature working to increase the number of jobs brought into your district, and how are you working to bring more jobs into your district?

Al Taylor: I'm proud to say we've had and I continue to have a small job development in my office where we're constantly looking for jobs that people walk in, in addition to sending them to different sites. It's hard. We ought to be able to bring more jobs to our communities, and what does that look like? Education will enhance more job opportunities. Housing will provide more job opportunities whether it's doing construction work, whether it's doing ... Oh goodness.

Al Taylor: We're doing a program with coding which kind of levels the playing field so that folks are equipped to do work. It's not just what types of jobs are coming but who are qualified to get those jobs and how do we increase those jobs. I'm trying to clarify this. There's a coding program that I'm working with that levels the field so younger folks are able to get a part. Our teenagers that are outside looking for work, that they'll be able to get some.

Al Taylor: I also think that from a city perspective if we're working and we're bringing in money to the State Division of Housing and Community Renewals. No. Children and Family Services, that will help provide more jobs when it come into the summertime, so half our kids are not unemployed.

Elinor Tatum: Mister Perez.

Guillermo Perez: We have a high crisis right now going on in terms of employment and jobs. If you look around there are a lot of construction going on in the 71 district. You can see that a lot of people that are taking those jobs, that are holding their jobs are not from the community. Many of them are coming from, and inclusive, from another state to work. You can see the plate numbers where they're coming from, and when they leave where they go.

Guillermo Perez: They cross George Washington Bridge. They go the 95 North, coming from another community. I believe that elected officials have to work on that. Bring

in renovations, on apartment renovations or housing renovation, building those buildings, working on the school renovation and especially for youth.

Guillermo Perez: Young people are coming graduated from colleges with a loan that they're going to pay for the rest of their life, and they're not finding jobs. What are we doing with that? What is going on in that? That is one of the reason why I need to get and to go in, in order to bring that response to the youth and the community.

Elinor Tatum: Now, a question on immigration. The community that you're seeking to represent and that you represent currently is a largely immigrant community. New York is a sanctuary city. How will you continue to protect the immigrants who live and work in your district?

Al Taylor: Well, I've participated, and I'm not sure if I can say, Holyrood Church there's someone there that is living there because they can't go back to their home in Long Island. As a clergy I fought and will continue to fight and stand for immigrants' rights so that if there is an issue ...

Al Taylor: Here's one of the parts. I think churches and other community folks I would ask them to lean in and help support their neighboring churches and community, because there is a need. Folks are living in some of these places, and they are not having proper food, change of clothing and things like that.

Al Taylor: As a clergy we've done a lot of work there to help, and as a legislator I think we need to fight more and push back against Trump to make sure that these things don't continue to happen in our neighborhoods. When you look at legislators, possibly yourself and myself as one, we have to fight and tow the line.

Al Taylor: I would say to the folks that are listening that it's important that you vote local so that you understand that we're fighting not just in our cities, but we're fighting in Washington to make sure those things don't continue to happen, and stand up push back against the Trump administration.

Guillermo Perez: I do believe that it's not an issue just on 71 district. I believe that we should motivate our elected officials in general throughout the United States until we get together. It's not about Washington [inaudible 00:27:19], it's not about Illinois. It's about altogether working in order to improve what's going on right now. It is a crime what's happening right now. Dividing the families, kids living in New York and family living in California.

Guillermo Perez: I believe that we have to stop that immediately. We have to create a way that we are going to work together in order to make the law stronger and protect the human, and protect people that are coming looking for a better life in the United States. There are a lot of things that we can do, but we have to concentrate on creating a plan as a team together.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you very much. Now we're going to go to closing statements. We will start with you Mister Perez.

Guillermo Perez: I really appreciate our friend Taylor. I want to thank Manhattan Network for giving us this opportunity. At the same time, I do believe that we have to create a way that people participate. On district 71 we have a latinos community. We have 53% but only 20% are participating on the election, are voting on the election day. I do believe that we have to motivate, you and I have a big responsibility on making sure that people come to vote because it's what is going to give us a power and people participation will make a decision.

Guillermo Perez: On September 13th I would like you to look at my proposal, go to my website and go look for Guillermo Ali Perez for New York, and search on my website and vote number one, on line number one on September 13. Thank you.

Elinor Tatum: Mister Taylor.

Al Taylor: I'd like to thank MNN for inviting me to participate. I thank you for joining us here today and thank you so much for hosting. I'm excited about what I've done, what I continue to do. I would invite my viewers to support what I've done. Listen, we have a very diverse community from one end of Manhattan to the next, at least in the 71st [inaudible 00:29:37] district. I am proud to serve. I look forward to serving you and I invite you also to visit my site, www.altaylor.org, www.altaylor.org.

Al Taylor: I look forward to having your support on Thursday September 13th. Remember, it's Thursday September 13th. Collectively we can change things.

Elinor Tatum: Thank you very much for joining us, and thank you for watching. Please remember to vote. A closed primary election will be held on 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 MNN's election 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. Goodbye.