

Courier Life

Human rights scorecard for pols

By Thomas Tracy
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Hey, we're only human.

But that doesn't mean our city legislators are staunch advocates for human rights.

So say members of the Human Rights Project at the Urban Justice Center, who recently released their "New York City Council Watch" -- a report card evaluating the human rights record of City Council members.

With the rankings handed out, Brooklyn legislators found themselves on both the very top and very bottom of the list as well as sprinkled throughout.

Topping the list with the highest grade was Fort Greene City Councilmember Letitia James, who received an 81 percent overall score when it came to sponsoring and voting on key legislation, as well as her support of human rights issues.

Her grade was also based on her responses to a special "human rights questionnaire" sent out by the Urban Justice Center, officials said.

Also receiving high marks was East New York Councilmember and former Black Panther Charles Barron, who came in second with an 80 percent score.

Rounding out the top ten was Bay Ridge City Councilmember Vincent Gentile, whose report card shows a 58.8 percent score.

But for every high-scoring Brooklyn councilmember in the top ten, there was a borough legislator scraping the bottom of the barrel.

Borough Park City Councilman Simcha Felder was given the dubious honor of ranking the lowest, with just a 29.3 percent score.

Other borough city legislators in the bottom ten were Sheepshead Bay City Councilman Michael Nelson (40.8 percent score) and Coney Island City Councilman Domenic Recchia (44 percent score).

Those finding themselves in the bottom half of the list criticized the study, finding that the Urban Justice Center's criteria was too selective.

"Councilman Felder stands by his record and is proud of his advocacy for human rights,"

a spokesman for the councilman told reporters. “Disability access to voting booths, safety for public and non public schools, and prevention of the financing for genocide in Darfur are just a few of the issues Councilman Felder has taken the lead on. Unfortunately he does not meet the arbitrary guidelines of this group.”

Members of the Urban Justice Center freely admit that their criteria was limited to a few key issues, although they took painstaking measures to narrow their field.

Council members were evaluated on their efforts to advance democracy, equality, environmental justice and improve health care, housing and work conditions for middle and lower income residents.

Bills introduced and put to a vote that fit the criteria included the Fair Housing bill, which promoted measures to fight segregation in residential housing, paid family leave, which would require private employers to provide paid leave to any employee who takes leave under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, the Asthma Free Housing Act, the School Safety Act, as well as bills calling for the recycling of electronics, increasing the number of street vendor permits in the city, protections against tenant harassment and the expanded services for people suffering from HIV and AIDS.

Also added into the mix was the City Council’s vote on term limits which the Urban Justice Center believes was a pivotal vote in the advancement of democracy in the city.

City Councilmembers James, Barron, Gentile, Bill de Blasio and Matthieu Eugene all voted against extending term limits.

The Urban Justice Center said that the City Council had “a mixed human rights record” in 2008.

“While it scored some relatively commendable points for passing legislation that advanced the equal enjoyment of rights for vulnerable groups, it scored much lower when its record of advancing democracy was assessed and lower still on its record for protecting the rights of workers,” the study stated.

When contacted, James said that she was “surprised and humbled” by her ranking and will continue “to focus on the human rights of all individuals.”

“I try to be consistent in my actions and the Urban Justice Center recognizes that fact,” she said, adding that in 2009 she will continue to lobby for legislation that would improve human rights and equitable housing for middle to lower income residents.

<http://www.yournabe.com/articles/2009/02/07/brooklyn/doc498d7c551667d508560818.txt>