

John Liu's Choice of Simcha Felder Raises Alarms

Top deputy to new comptroller a consistent anti-gay vote on City Council

BY PAUL SCHINDLER



Third-term Brooklyn City Councilman was named a top deputy to City Comptroller John Liu, who took office on January 1. (COUNCIL.NYC.GOV)

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Barely a month after the LGBT community turned out en masse to protest the eight no votes from among the city's 26 state senators that resulted in the marriage equality bill failing on December 2, some gay political leaders expressed alarm that newly sworn-in City Comptroller John Liu has appointed as one of his four deputies a Brooklyn City Council member who cited "religious reasons" in withholding his vote from Christine Quinn when she ran for speaker in 2006.

In commenting on Liu's choice of Simcha Felder, who in eight years on the Council has consistently voted against LGBT rights measures, as deputy comptroller for accounting and budget, however, activists took pains to emphasize that the new comptroller himself is a "friend" to the community. Felder even won a few warm words, though those were carefully qualified.

Matthew McMorow, an executive board member of the Lambda Independent Democrats (LID), a Brooklyn gay political club, noted his group endorsed Liu in advance of last September's primary, then continued, "We are, however, alarmed by his choice of Simcha Felder for deputy comptroller. As a City Council member, Mr. Felder had one of the worst records on LGBT issues, even among Republicans. Let us not forget that he voted against the Equal Benefits Law, and he acted cowardly by refusing to vote in favor of Speaker Christine

Quinn, preferring to hide in the bathroom rather than vote for a lesbian.”

When Quinn won her first four-year term as Council speaker in January 2006, it was widely reported that Felder had gone to the men’s room at the moment the vote was cast. A year later, he was quoted in City Hall News explaining, “For religious reasons, I could not vote for her.” Quinn was reelected speaker on January 6, one day after Felder’s appointment by Liu, and the Brooklyn Council member was not at City Hall for that vote.

The Equal Benefits Law, which passed the Council over Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s veto in 2004, only to be thrown out by the state’s highest court in 2006, would have required private contractors doing business with New York City to offer their gay and lesbian employees partnership benefits equivalent to the spousal policies offered married workers. Among Felder’s other votes against LGBT rights were his no vote on the city’s 2002 transgender rights law and his opposition in 2007 to strengthening the city’s domestic partnership law to give registered partners all the rights that married couples enjoy under city law.

The Urban Justice Center’s 2009 Human Rights Report Card — which rates Council members on the commitment their votes demonstrate to advancing democracy, equality, environmental justice, healthcare accessibility, housing rights, workplace fairness, and education opportunity — ranked Felder dead last out of 51. Liu, in sharp contrast, finished number four.

The Jim Owles Liberal Democratic Club, another LGBT group, took an even stronger line against the Felder appointment than did LID.

“I am glad that Felder will no longer be able to vote against us in the Council and hope that Felder earns his big bucks in the comptroller’s office by counting beans and not setting human rights policies,” Allen Roskoff, Jim Owles’ president, said in an email message. “I will not thank our friend Comptroller John Liu for hiring Felder, but he has actually done us a service by removing a bigot from the Council.”

Others avoided Roskoff’s heavy dose of snark in noting Liu’s close ties to the community. LID reiterated its “trust” that the new comptroller would “make smart decisions about employment matters in his new office,” adding, “We remain hopeful that the selection of Mr. Felder does not in any way interfere with Comptroller Liu’s commitment to support LGBT rights and the issues affecting LGBT New Yorkers.”

Zachary Woolfe, president of the Gay and Lesbian Independent Democrats, said his club “has been deeply disappointed” by Felder’s voting record on the Council and is “troubled by his appointment to a position of citywide authority and importance.” He noted, however, that Felder’s “responsibility is now to the entire city, not just a single Council district, and we hope that he can be persuaded by his new boss, our friend John Liu, to revisit his outdated and harmful positions.”

LID’s McMorrow wrote, “The positions Felder has taken on LGBT issues in the past run counter to the gay-friendly positions on corporate governance and shareholder rights the new comptroller took during last year’s campaign.”

Stonewall Democrats was the group most restrained in its reaction to Felder’s appointment. “We understand that the comptroller and other officials seek the diversity of NYC’s communities, though we may not have agreed on every issue with Felder,” Richard Allman, the group’s president, said in an email. “We strongly encourage and anticipate that the hiring policies of Mr. Liu and other electeds will draw on leadership and talent from NYC’s large LGBT community.”

One longtime gay activist, Daniel Tietz, a former LID president, went so far as to offer words of praise for Felder, describing him as “very smart and capable,” with “the necessary education and experience for the position.”

“He’s got political smarts and gives Liu access to and credibility with some key constituents

and voters," he added.

That access and credibility — with the Borough Park Orthodox Jewish community Felder comes from and has represented on the Council — however, is a dual-edged sword, according to Tietz. "I think this sort of stuff from him is a bit nutty," he said of Felder's explanation for not voting for Quinn. "Worse, I think Simcha knows it doesn't make any sense and he does it to pander to and make happy with the worst elements in his community. But then he'll turn right around and work with Chris, the other LGBT members, the progressives, etc., on most everything."

Liu's office declined several specific requests for comment about Felder's new responsibilities, his disagreements with the comptroller, and how conflicts between official policy and Felder's religious and political views on LGBT rights will be resolved.

Liu comes into office with strong support among LGBT political activists, having won endorsement in last September's Democratic primary, over three opponents, from LID, Jim Owles, Stonewall, the Out People of Color Political Action Club (Out POC PAC), and the Lesbian and Gay Democratic Club of Queens. (Full disclosure: Liu was also the primary choice of this newspaper.)

Out POC PAC did not respond to a request for comment, and the Empire State Pride Agenda, the state's LGBT lobby, declined comment.