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LOOK WHO'S RUNNING: New Haven mayoral race getting crowded

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NEW HAVEN — This year's municipal election is starting to get crowded.

Four Democrats are challenging nine-term Mayor John DeStefano Jr. At least 19 new people are running for alderman, all of them Democrats.

And while city business slows during the summer months, campaigns are starting to heat up, with candidates pounding pavement, hosting meet-and-greets and taking aim at their opponents. Observers say it's an extraordinary year due to the lingering effects of the recession and a spike in gun violence.

Challenging DeStefano are four Democrats: lawyer Clifton Graves Jr., budget watchdog Jeffrey Kerekes and former aldermen Anthony Dawson and Robert Lee. Graves, Dawson and Lee have focused their campaigns on combating neighborhood violence. This has been a particularly violent year for New Haven, with 19 homicides on the record books so far.

Kerekes is running on a platform of straightening out the city's finances, providing property tax relief and increasing transparency in government.

Also taking aim at the mayor and his allies on the Board of Aldermen are a slew of new Democratic candidates, many of whom have strong union ties. A number of incumbent aldermen have challengers this year and at least six have declared they will not seek re-

election. Three-term Alderman Gerald Antunes, D-12, announced last week he will not run again, and lambasted DeStefano, saying he thinks 18 years is too long for one person to be in office. Also not coming back next year are Michael Jones, D-1; Frances "Bitsie" T. Clark, D-7; Joseph Rodriguez, D-15; and Tom Lehtonen, D-27. Alderwoman Gina Calder, D-2, stepped down from the board July 1. A number of incumbent aldermen still have not filed papers in the City Clerk's office declaring their intention to run.

Many of the new aldermanic candidates are active in the labor movement through state jobs or through Yale University. Their entry into political races comes at a time when the city has locked horns with labor leaders over contract talks. The city is in arbitration with three unions.

And though it's early, some mayoral candidates are ramping up their campaigns. Kerekes is taking sharp aim at DeStefano and accusing the mayor of turning the city into a financial mess through wasteful spending, cronyism and continued adherence to failed policies. Kerekes has made a series of campaign promises, most notably that he will not raise taxes without asking permission from taxpayers by way of a vote. Also, he vowed to drastically lower his own compensation if elected and proposed a plan to give tax breaks to city employees who move into the city.

Graves has been very visible at multiple campaign events and he and Dawson have attended anti-violence rallies. Dawson has secured a statement of support from the Greater New Haven Clergy Association, which in the past has been a supporter of DeStefano.

In his campaign appearances, DeStefano has highlighted priorities such as job creation, economic development, improving schools, investing in young people and strengthening public safety. DeStefano often touts the district's school reform initiative and New Haven Promise. Regarding violence, he frequently points out that it is mostly connected to narcotics and the prison re-entry population. DeStefano said the city needs to focus on aggressive narcotics enforcement, police visibility and expanding the prison re-entry network.

The mayoral race is unfolding as the city continues to battle budget woes and ended the year with a deficit of \$4.2 million. In February, 82 workers were laid off and more layoffs could come if the city's fragile financial condition worsens.

At this month's Ward 30 Democratic Town Committee meeting, residents from all over the city heard four mayoral candidates speak and answer questions.

Esther Pearson met the candidates and said she thinks the city needs a change.

"We are looking for what the mayor needs to give us that he hasn't given us," she said. Pearson would not say who she supports for mayor.

Cheryl Jaminson, who lives in Ward 2, asked the candidates how they would combat crime. Kerekes and Graves were the only candidates still around when the question was asked.

Kerekes said the city needs to improve schools and youth programs. Regarding law enforcement, Kerekes said the city needs to reconsider deployment of officers and make sure there are experienced officers on duty at night, when crime happens. Graves said the city needs to refocus on community policing and better address the problem of guns on the streets.

Democrat Town Committee Chairwoman Susan Voigt said there seems to be more candidates than usual this year, which she attributed mostly to the bad economy.

"These are really difficult times," she said.

The Democratic Town Committee nominating convention will be July 26, and the primary on Sept. 13.

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