

# The Metro Section

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## In New York Mayoral Campaign, It Seems You Are What You Rent

By PATRICK D. HEALY

If money is everything in politics, and real estate is everything in New York City, the four top Democratic contenders for mayor have a long way to go — think railroad flat to penthouse with a park view — if they hope to unseat Michael R. Bloomberg this fall.

The mayor, a billionaire who spent \$72 million on the 2001 campaign and is financing his re-election bid, is setting a high bar: paying \$55,000 a month for 19,000 square feet just off Bryant Park for his campaign headquarters. The offices have a corporate sheen, with new flat-screen televisions and views of Midtown skyscrapers, but a campaign spokesman, Stu Loeser, warns against the image of a King Mike in his 19th-floor aerie.

"It's not down-market, but it's certainly not opulent," Mr. Loeser said.

Maybe not, but the Democrats are typically spending roughly a tenth of that on

rent for digs that vary widely. C. Virginia Fields, the Manhattan borough president, is running her campaign out of the basement of a brownstone on West 126th Street, where, her top consultant says, "We have a front room, a back room, a bathroom, and a place to collect all the checks."

Council Speaker Gifford Miller and United States Representative Anthony D. Weiner are down by City Hall, renting 2,700 and 2,200 square feet respectively. Mr. Miller is paying \$6,400, or about 50 percent more than Mr. Weiner's \$3,950, for a Nassau Street address that is about two blocks closer to the mayor's office. The views are obstructed.

Fernando Ferrer, the Democratic candidate who is leading in the polls, has the most advantageous rent deal of the quartet. Unlike his rivals, Mr. Ferrer did not have to put down a security deposit for his 3,300-square-

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foot headquarters at 14 East 38th Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues. Nor was his campaign asked to pay the rent of \$5,225 a month until six weeks after the mid-February move-in.

The Ferrer lease is with a real estate company of the Schur family, who are major contributors to his campaign, giving \$44,550 for this race. An official in the Ferrer campaign said the company did not require a deposit because the Schurs knew that Mr. Ferrer, of the Bronx, was good for the money. But some election lawyers said that the previously undisclosed absence of a deposit could be somewhat outside the city's campaign finance rules, a charge that the campaign rejects.

Political headquarters are often windows into the strategies, needs and personalities of the campaigns and the candidates themselves. The Harlem brownstone is one sign that, for better or worse, Ms. Fields is husbanding resources as much as possible, putting off a larger headquarters and the hiring of costly staff members like a campaign manager and press secretary. And the office is in a supportive neighborhood, as she is counting on strong backing from black voters.

Mr. Ferrer, meanwhile, is relying on donors who have always been there for him and is forgoing the symbolism of large offices with an upscale address that might benefit a Democratic front-runner.

"If the minority candidates had headquarters that reeked of wealth, it will vitiate their claim that they represent 'the other,'" said Rodolfo de la Garza, a professor of political science at Columbia University. "That isn't an issue for Bloomberg; it would be disingenuous of him to have his office in Washington Heights."

Yet it would be folly to read too much into their rental leases: a



**\$55,000 A MONTH** Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, a billionaire, has rented 19,000 square feet of office space at 111 West 40th Street.

Quinnipiac University poll released last week showed that in the last month, support for Ms. Fields rose to 21 percent from 14 percent, while Mr. Ferrer's support fell to 36 percent from 40 percent. Even in New York, real estate may not be everything.

"If a campaign is operating smart, it's operating lean, so I'm not rushing to hire big-name consultants or get fancy office space," said Joseph Mercurio, the Fields campaign's top consultant, whose company has earned \$114,500 in fees from her since 2003. He said that brokers were looking for a possible headquarters in Midtown.

Saving money on rent, while ideal, is only one side of the coin: political and psychological factors can come into play, too. In 2004, John F. Kerry ran his presidential campaign from formal-looking, if cramped, offices in Washington that included elevators and back entrances to whisk in advisers for secret meetings when the news media was camped out front. Four years earlier, Al Gore decamped from Washington and went

back to Tennessee, to add a down-home feel to his operation.

Headquarters can also become matters of controversy. During the city's last mayoral election, in 2001, the campaign of the Democrat Alan Hevesi drew fire from some rivals because so much campaign work was done at consultants' offices.

Mr. Ferrer's current lease, with its lack of a deposit, prompted some questions this week. The Bloomberg, Gifford and Weiner campaigns have paid security deposits (with the mayor's totaling \$55,239), while Ms. Fields is paying for space in her campaign treasurer's brownstone.

Leo Glickman, a Democratic campaign finance lawyer not affiliated with any campaign, said yesterday that it was "highly unusual" for a campaign to sign a lease for Manhattan office space and not have to pay customary fees like a security deposit. The fact that the realty company is owned by major donors suggests that the absent deposit is an in-kind contribution.

A spokeswoman for the city's Campaign Finance Board said that all financial transactions must be reported in campaign finance filings. She said the absence of a deposit would be reviewed as part of the board's standard audit of all candidates' office leases and other financial materials.

Mr. Clanton also noted that the Ferrer campaign's headquarters were modest compared with the mayor's, which are nearly six times their size.

"This race is like Seabiscuit against War Admiral," he said, referring to the racehorses of old. "We understand that like War Admiral, the Bloomberg campaign will have all the advantages that the well-connected elites enjoy."

Asked if Mr. Ferrer's ties to the Schurs were not a pretty good connection too, Mr. Clanton said: "This is a self-funded billionaire mayor who will spend at least \$100 million on this campaign. That's not us."