

## Saline Solution

Contributed by Ed Griffin-Nolan

Mayoral candidates Stephanie Miner and Joe Nicoletti believe they can solve the Salt City's problems

It's a pretty safe bet that either Joe Nicoletti or Stephanie Miner will emerge victorious in the race for the Democratic nomination for mayor of Syracuse, and that the election in this increasingly Democratic city will then be his or hers to lose. The victor in the Republican primary, now a contest between former Parks Commissioner Otis Jennings and broadcast executive Steve Kimatian, will face an uphill battle in a city where enrollment favors the Democrats by a margin of 3-to-1.

When Democrats enter the booth on Tuesday, Sept. 15, they will find four names on the mayoral primary ballot. Community activist Alfonso Davis has distinguished himself as a persistent and engaging voice for change, but if fundraising and party support count for anything, it appears that his time has not yet arrived. Latecomer Carmen Harlow, the former deputy commissioner of public works who joined the race after the party gave its official designation to Miner, has little more than lawn signs to show for his effort.

Miner and Nicoletti differ in many ways but most obvious is gender. If Miner wins she will be the first woman to serve as mayor of Syracuse or, for that matter, any major upstate city. They also represent the faces of two different generations of Syracusans. Joe Nicoletti, 61, first worked in city government when Stephanie Miner, 39, was in high school. "I am an original Woodstock child," says Nicoletti, who was at the fabled festival 40 years ago. Miner spent the four days of peace, love and music in Syracuse, in utero.

They speak in completely different terms as well. Miner's prose is clipped like a lawyer's, while Nicoletti could be the guy in the next lane at the bowling alley. Miner comes across as so driven and issue-oriented that even one of her backers, former Mayor Tom Young, has been quoted suggesting she show the public some warmth.

Nicoletti, who wants to see pictures of everyone's kids and can't stop talking about his daughter Elizabeth's upcoming wedding, has been described (by a Miner supporter) as a guy who is "everyone's best friend in 30 seconds." He wants you to trust that he can get the job done; she wants you to understand her plan.

Nicoletti's style of politics most resembles the man he first sought to follow at City Hall, the beloved and bedeviled four-term Mayor Lee Alexander, while Miner can sound at times like her one-time boss Mario Cuomo.

Democrats control all but one seat on the Common Council, and have held the mayor's office since the mid-1960s, with the exception of Roy Bernardi's two terms. Bernardi, who cut short his mayoralty when invited by George W. Bush to be a deputy secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 2001, beat Nicoletti in 1993 by 53 percent to 47 percent. The ghost of that election, which split Democrats lost after Nicoletti beat Joe Fahey in a bitter primary, hangs over the current race.

Four years after losing to Bernardi, Nicoletti switched parties and became his former rival's director of operations. That flip-flop soured his relations with Democrats, yet today he counts on the support of Democratic Councilor-at-Large Mike Heagerty, Council President Bea Gonzalez, Assemblywoman Joan Christensen and former Councilor Kate O'Connell. His stint with Bernardi also led to his involvement in the signature issue of his campaign and his television ads, the redevelopment of Clinton Square.

Miner, a lawyer who has served eight years as a councilor-at-large, is known for her opposition to extending tax concessions to developer Robert Congel for the project known as Destiny USA, and her promotion of the Say Yes to Education program. She enjoys the support of Young, the city's only living Democratic former mayor, and Councilors Bill Ryan, Pat Hogan, Kathleen Joy, Tom Seals and Lance Denno.

In the dog days of August, both Nicoletti and Miner sat down with The New Times for separate conversations about their desire to become mayor of the city of Syracuse.

Q: What does it take to win this race?

Stephanie Miner: A compelling message and the ability to deliver it.

Joe Nicoletti: It's about who has the temperament, the experience and who can bring us together as a community. That's the core of this election.

Q: What would you like your tenure as mayor to be known for?

Nicoletti: I want to be the mayor to put cranes back in the air. Here's my list of projects: I want to get four schools in the ground. The Mizpah Building, the Hotel Syracuse, Convention Center hotel, the AT&T building. There's a difference between protecting the taxpayer and being an obstructionist. That's the kind of sparkplug I'm gonna be.

I have a great passionate belief in this community. Syracuse is the only city where you can go in 12 minutes from standing downtown and then be standing eating a fresh apple in an apple orchard. In 28 minutes you can be on the shore of the cleanest lake in America, Skaneateles.

I'm an optimist. We are going to move this city forward. We're going to make ourselves the focal point of New York state.

Miner: I want to be the mayor who innovates Syracuse and makes it a thriving 21st-century city. We find ourselves in a very precarious position. There is both great peril and great promise. To maximize the promise we need to make strategic decisions, and to change the way we approach decisions and analysis. We need to embrace risk.

Q: Is your campaign looking backward? Clinton Square is done. What examples are there of projects you have moved forward in recent years?

Nicoletti: This campaign is about the future but oftentimes you have to look at the past to see who has the experience. I got a degree from {Syracuse University's} Maxwell {School} in urban planning. I was a member of the Assembly, I was on the Council, worked in the private sector. I worked for the mayor. No one has the type of experience or legislative agenda of accomplishment that I have.

When I was with the city, we built Clinton Square. For 20 years this community debated what they would do with Clinton Square. I got it done in a year. We created a community gathering place, a water feature, a skating rink. When the Labor Day storm hit in 1998, I was the focal point for getting the city cleaned up and operating again.

If we can get these projects going we're going to create a tremendous influx into this city. We need construction. We need jobs. I've done it; I know I can do it. Being mayor is more than just saying what you are opposed to. I look at people's records for solutions and some of them are pretty shallow.

Q: Do you mean Stephanie Miner?

Nicoletti: It's politics. You can run a sniping campaign all you want. I'm going to be positive.

Q: Can you give examples recently of things you've done in recent years?

Nicoletti: I'm chair of my church council, during the merger to bring two churches together. In the background, when there was strife over housing near St. Joseph's Hospital, I was involved. I've been away from government for a while. I worked for three or four different companies. Nextel—I was their regional vice president and later was a consultant for that company's government and higher education relationships. That included working as a liaison for both Syracuse University and SUNY Morrisville, when Morrisville went wireless and when SU and their Sports Information Department needed cell phone service. Worked with Johnson Controls in government relations. I worked for Central Parking, which used to be Allright Parking. That was a period when I decided to leave government work and take care of my parents. I haven't stopped, even while I'm out of office.

Q: You speak of the need to embrace risk. What's an example of embracing risk?

Miner: Merging the county and city economic development offices.

Q: What's the risk in that?

Miner: Obviously that would give the county influence in our economic development decisions. The risk is that there's a history with the county where they have not exactly been focused on city needs and issues. The siting of the sewage treatment facilities {at Midland Avenue and Armory Square} is a prime example, but there's a whole host of issues. That has changed under {County Executive} Joanie's {Mahoney} administration. She recognizes that you can't have a vibrant county without a vibrant city.

Q: What is the promise of the city's future?

Miner: A city of fantastically diverse, livable neighborhoods. We need to focus on the quality of life in those neighborhoods, and restore a focus on what makes a neighborhood livable. Look to the assets we have, chief among them Say Yes to Education, as a tool to keep people in our neighborhoods and to recruit people to our city. The promise of a free college education is a tremendous tool to help keep people in our city.

Q: You say on your Web site that it's not about restoring Syracuse to what it was in the past. Is that a swipe at Joe Nicoletti?

Miner: When I talk about restoring Syracuse to what it once was, here's what I mean. There was a time when people would talk about going downtown and there would be department stores and movie theaters, and there was a longing for that. People in our neighborhoods aren't talking that way anymore. What they're saying is, "We have a fantastic neighborhood, and it can be even better, if we make smart decisions, if we market ourselves and focus on our assets. To be a city of the 21st century, not the city of 1950." That's not a swipe at Joe, that's a statement of who I am.

Q: Everyone running says they're for Say Yes to Education, and in favor of making it a line item in the budget. Is that enough? Do we need to be talking about consolidating school districts?

Miner: It's much more complicated than that. It sounds great to say that Say Yes is going to be a line item. It's got tremendous promise, but without the right leadership it will fall by the wayside. It's about more than the money. It's about having a mayor who wakes up every day and says, "It's my job to make sure children graduate. It's my job to make sure they get the services they need to alleviate the impact of poverty and also get the quality of education they need in order to achieve their destiny." That's not just about a line item in a budget once a year, it's about day in and day out maintaining a commitment to the schools, parents, children. It's easy to say "line item," but what I'm talking about is not easy.

Nicoletti: Here's what people don't get. Syracuse is like every other city. We need federal, state and other municipal support. When I ran the Council I used to tell councilors that the day you take the oath you shed your party label. You become a public servant. We have to recognize something: 32 percent to 36 percent of our population is what I call diverse. I do not like the term "minority." I like to look at it as our diversity factor. I have always been a champion of diverse populations.

Our diversity factor is often celebrated by politicians when they are running for office. If we are to succeed we will need a mayor who can recognize that diversity and make it work. We need to open up the economic development policy to a diverse population. We will never be a great community until we open up the economic development wheel to everyone. We do this by reshaping our economic development process. I would contend that I am the only candidate that has a record of doing that.

Q: Would you consider a conversation on consolidating school districts?

Miner: I would not rule anything out. Based on my eight years in city government, I don't think that is a discussion that has any sort of traction. Say Yes gets the services into the schools. It means that when a child sits at a desk in our public schools, they are ready to learn. Not hungry, not sick, not impaired by poverty.

Q: You are the only Democrat to have lost an open mayor's race since the 1960s. How can you convince people that this time you can win?

Nicoletti: In 1993 it was the primary. We're not going to let that happen again. I caution my staff when sniping is going on. I tell them to keep quiet. I can win because I have the maturity, wisdom and experience to pull the best out of people.

Q: How do you expect this to go? In 1993 there was a famous primary that led to a division in the party that many people feel led to the election of Roy Bernardi.

Miner: I have been overwhelmed by the support and generosity of the people. I've received the support of the Working Families Party, the local Independence Party, 72 percent of the Democratic Committee. People are responding to my message. I plan to take the high road. I have no illusions that that is going to be shared by my opponents. I fully expect that they are going to continue to ratchet up the politics of personal destruction.

Q: Will you support the Democratic nominee for mayor?

Nicoletti: Yes, I think all the candidates have agreed to that.

Miner: Absolutely.

Q: There is a perception out there and I want to give you the chance to address it. It's that you have a hard time getting along with people. Can you see what it is in you that creates this perception?

Miner: The only people who are saying that is Joe Nicoletti and his supporters. It's very telling that they don't attack my ideas, my votes, my policies. Instead it's a personal, fairly trite, and old worn-out shoe.

It is not lost on me that we heard these same attacks on {Supreme Court appointee Sonia} Sotomayor, the same time they were doing it to me. They have made these types of attacks on Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, Rosemary Pooler. And there is obviously a similar characteristic.

I disagree with the premise that I just can't get along with people. My colleagues voted me president pro tem of the Council. I can point to lots of legislation that was passed. The overwhelming majority of my colleagues support me. All of that destroys the illusion that I have a "temperament" problem. It's easy to say that when you can't come up with your own ideas or your own qualifications or accomplishments. It's Politics 101: Attack the other person. And that's what he has engaged in.

On Say Yes, on Destiny, a majority of my colleagues joined me. In six years as chair of the finance committee, I brought budgets through, I was able to put in a new policy on fiscal discipline and bonding.

Q: You have frequently accused your opponent of running on the basis of her opposition to Destiny USA.

Nicoletti: The lesson from Destiny is "don't put all your eggs in one basket." My economic plan is going to be a multifaceted approach. I'm going to get this community moving. The Connective Corridor, the Gateway to the South Side. I'm going to lay out a 100-day agenda, and we are going to put cranes in the skies and move this city forward. The secret to success is to create an atmosphere where we can create jobs. I look at Destiny and say, "That's what happens when you depend on just one project."

Q: In a speech you gave after Mayor Matt Driscoll held a vote of the Syracuse Industrial Development Agency {SIDA} on the July 4 weekend in 2006, you spoke of an "evil truth" that the people of Syracuse should look at, rather than listen to the "siren song" of Destiny's promises. What did you mean?

Miner: Bob Congel promised us that he was going to transform the economy of Syracuse with this one project. That's an evil truth. It's easier to believe in that than to look at the hard work needed to promote economic development.

Q: Let's say it's Jan. 1, and you're the mayor. How do you envision the relationship with Bob Congel working out?

Miner: I have been straightforward in my views. No one has questioned why I was doing what I was doing. There are lots of times when you look across the table and that may not be your favorite person. You figure out a way to work together. We both have a job to do and my job is to protect the taxpayer. I'm a lawyer, and what a lawyer does is find solutions to problems.

Q: What do you say to people who argue that the Destiny deal does not cost the taxpayer anything?

Miner: It's not accurate. Carousel Center and Destiny sit on the largest single piece of taxable property in the city of Syracuse and Onondaga County and it's not paying taxes because of the actions taken by SIDA and the mayor.

When police get called, when the fire department is dispatched, the taxpayers pay for it. They said that the amount of revenue in sales tax would dwarf property taxes. That clearly has not happened, has it? Seventy percent of every dollar in property taxes goes to the school district. The constituency that lost the most in this are the children in the city school district, 85 percent of whom are poor.

Q: What would it mean for you to be the first woman mayor of Syracuse?

Miner: I don't know. I haven't thought about it. I'm running to be mayor. I'm running on my ideas. It would be special, but being mayor would be more special. There is one sense in which I would be very humbled and find it profound. My grandmother, Betty Cooney, was a very active Democrat and it was because of her that I got into politics. My earliest memories are of stuffing envelopes at her kitchen table. She would be thrilled to pieces to know that I was running.

Q: Would you initiate a national search for a police chief?

Nicoletti: I don't know. There's a strong argument in both police and fire that you need to bring people up through the ranks. We have a mayor who is doing an outstanding job, and some very good people working for him.

Miner: I'm not going to comment on personnel matters.

Q: Would you modify the contract with the police to ensure accountability to the community by forcing officers to be accountable before the Citizen Review Board (CRB)?

Miner: It's more complicated than that. The current model for the CRB is flawed. I think we will never move forward with the current model. I would move more toward a mediation model such as the one that has been successful elsewhere, such as in New York City. We need to have neighborhood-based police officers so there is a relationship with the neighborhood. What we see in certain neighborhoods is that residents are not willing to share information with the police officers. The real hallmark has to be a community-based police force.

Nicoletti: CRB is something that has to be looked at. I would hope that we will be able to build a dialogue and trust an interaction that would not make this an issue of opposing views. I have some ideas about how to get people to the table on this one.

Q: Can you share some of them?

Nicoletti: Not until I speak with the principals. It's like when the Hotel Syracuse was on strike, I got involved, told everyone that it was time for them to shut up, let's look at the problems one by one.

I think we can get there. I have some ideas. We need to establish a framework that will make everyone in our community happy. We need to get to a result where everyone's rights are protected, the citizens as well as the police. How we get to that structure is what we have to hammer out. What we are aiming toward is a structure that works.