

This Just In

The Political Scene

Cutting through the info-fog of the PVD mayor's race

Three major Democratic candidates for Providence mayor held press conferences at Prospect Terrace Park in the last week. On Friday morning, August 22, Jorge Elorza and Brett Smiley stepped to a podium together to tell the crowd that Smiley is dropping out and endorsing his former opponent. Pointing specifically to City Council President Michael Solomon as “someone currently under investigation by the Ethics Commission who has a \$400,000 unpaid sweetheart loan to the city,” Smiley said, “In recent weeks, it’s become increasingly clear that it will be an enormous step backwards for Michael Solomon to lead our city.” Elorza followed by saying that if Smiley had stayed in the race, it was possible Solomon could win the primary, then lose to Cianci in November. “And Brett and I both agreed that there was no way we could allow that to happen.”

Solomon’s conference took place four days later, mere paces from where his opponents had set up. It gave him a chance to do a few things. First, he was introduced by former city councilman, former state representative, and human stamp-of-liberal-approval, David Segal, who ticked off items from Solomon’s “strong, obvious progressive governance record,” ranging from spearheading the council’s vote to divest from fossil fuels to his work to protect and expand affordable housing in the city. Solomon proceeded to apologize for the errors he made in the ethics filings (the grounds for the Commission’s inquiry), but he stood by his still-unsettled Providence Economic Development Partnership loan from the 1980s intended to help re-purpose a building on Westminster Street. (He and his partners reduced the principal by \$50,000 last year, Solomon said, and, in the first place, “That project created jobs. It spurred economic development.”) Before he spoke, a campaign consultant handed out press releases with polling data that — though the full methodology of the poll was not released and Republican candidate, Dr. Dan Harrop’s name was misspelled “Harrup” — suggested Solomon has a 36 versus 35 percent edge in a potential Cianci showdown, while Elorza faces a seven-percent deficit in a hypothetical Cianci battle. “Solomon Campaign Releases Poll Showing He’s the Only Candidate Who Can Defeat Cianci,” the release proclaimed.

That Solomon poll admitted to a 4.6 percent margin of error and, in general, things are getting pretty foggy out there, info-wise. So we tried to sift through the spin and sound bites, to offer few things we know to be true.

- We know that Smiley and Elorza are trying to portray Solomon and Cianci as old-school politicians cut from the same cloth. A Cianci/Solomon



PROSPECTS Elorza and Smiley; Solomon and supporters.

matchup would be “the king of the ‘know-a-guy’ running against the former king of the ‘know-a-guy’ system,” Smiley told reporters at his press conference. On the other hand, when Solomon was asked at his presser whether he is, indeed, a “know-a-guy” guy, he said, “I wasn’t appointed as a housing court judge [like Elorza]. And I wasn’t appointed to the Providence Water Supply Board [like Smiley] . . . I was the only candidate that was elected in this race.”

- We know that on August 24, the *Projo* “enthusiastically” endorsed Jorge Elorza, arguing he “would bring to the job great intelligence, high energy and a unique ability to unite a very diverse city.”

- We know reporters have been trying to fairly and accurately describe Solomon’s verbal skills. Rhode Island Public Radio’s Ian Donnis wrote he “wrestles with challenges in public communication”; WPRI.com’s Dan McGowan described him as “a poor communicator.”

- We know that, as of the last campaign-finance filing deadline on August 11, Solomon had about two-and-a-half times the funds on hand (\$404,269.13) as Elorza (\$160,621.28).

- We know the alliance between Elorza and Smiley extends past a simple one-candidate-drops-out-to-endorse-another press conference. In recent days, they have appeared together at farmers markets and meet-and-greets around the city, and Jorge Elorza posted a press release — “Team Elorza Gains Momentum, Shows Unity with Addition of Former Smiley Staffers” — accompanied by a photo of a storefront displaying their campaign signs, side-by-side. Asked whether this new partnership was akin to a dual ticket, Elorza said, “Perhaps it is.” This, of course, has fueled speculation about whether Smiley and Elorza made a behind-the-scenes arrangement for a City Hall position for Smiley, in the event of an Elorza victory. (Camp Solomon describes their partnership as a “last minute backroom political deal.”) Of this, Elorza would only say, “I look forward to working with Brett and I look forward to having his advice and his counsel as we turn this city around.”

- We know that Primary Day is Tuesday, September 9, and the victor will step into the ring with a 73-year-old, twice-convicted, former prosecutor/cancer survivor/on-hiatus talk radio host who’s probably both the most famous and infamous man in our city’s 378-year history.

- We know, if nothing else, this will be a hell of a lot of fun to watch.

—Philip Eil

“DOT Air is an absolute positive thing. It’s about being forward-thinking, it’s about looking at what’s actually going on in Pawtucket right now rather than looking back on its industrial past.”

—JAMES TOOMEY

Festivals, Etc.

A MUSICAL EXPERIMENT UNDER A BRIDGE IN PAWTUCKET

It’s a sunny, breezy day on Saturday, August 23 and I find myself slouched over, grimacing at the pavement under a bridge in Pawtucket. There are several frequencies — some very high, others low, all incredibly loud — reverberating off the bridge’s beams and pylons. I close my eyes and it sounds for a moment like I’m in some hellish factory where the machinery is revolting against the workers, or I’m inside a tunnel, listening to the screeching metal of a train that is about to kill me. Eventually, the screeching metal gives way to beautiful, bass-y oscillations and spacious white noise, reminding me I’m not about to die, I’m at the DOT AIR experimental music festival and Work/Death is playing.

Work/Death is Scott Reber, a long-time contributor to Providence’s noise music scene who is known to use anything from synths and modulators to plastic bags and scraps of metal to create sounds that are sometimes harsh and grating, often sublime and cathartic. It’s fitting that his set is evocative of an industrial nightmare — the festival’s name is an acronym for “death of the American Industrial Revolution.”

That name sounds dark, but the event’s concept is anything but, according to James Toomey, director of marketing for the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, which co-organized the event with the Pawtucket recording studio, Machines with Magnets. “DOT AIR is an absolute positive thing; it’s about being forward-thinking, it’s about looking at what’s actually going on in Pawtucket right now rather than looking back on its industrial past,” he explains in between sets at the show. “Right now there’s a couple hundred people just hanging out by the river, and they’re here to support art — new art, different art.”

Willa Van Nostrand, manager at Machines with Magnets, says the show’s name did create some confusion in the weeks leading up to it. “We got some phone calls from people wanting to know if the French band, Air, was playing,” she says. “I was like, ‘Under a bridge, in Pawtucket?’ . . . No.”



LILTING DISSONANCE The Eyesores.

Air isn’t on the bill, but eight local acts are, along with several craft booths, food trucks, and an estimated 500 attendees temporarily taking over Taft Street. According to Toomey, the location was chosen for its unique acoustics and to showcase the multicolored array of lights on the newly renovated bridge, which was completed last summer, and took about \$81 million and three years to build. (Incidentally, the lights aren’t working properly this evening, but no one seems to mind.)

Van Nostrand and sister Glenna opened the day’s lineup with a performance involving a kiddie pool, several large jugs of water, and a small pitcher of live feeder fish. The pair took the stage in white swim caps and vintage swimsuits, making themselves comfortable alongside the fish in the contact-miked pool, using modulators and singing through snorkel mouthpieces outfitted with plastic tubing. It was strange and lovely.

The Providence-based Assembly of Light women’s choir sang at dusk, in an ethereal, commanding performance led by composer and singer Chrissy Wolpert. Later, the accordion-fueled lilting dissonance of Alec K. Redfearn & the Eyesores seemed right at home in the middle of the road under a highway overpass, and Pawtucket-based three-piece band Psyche played a happy, raucous set.

After that, Boston-based musician Kevin Micka led the Animal Hospital Ensemble, a rotating cast of dozens of musicians which played in a circle surrounding the audience. The ensemble was comprised mostly of guitar players, whose mesmeric droning, loops, and buzzes inspired the audience to spontaneously mill around the band’s inside perimeter, forming a rotating concentric circle to observe the musicians as they played.

The night ended with the crowd assembling into a sort of big sweaty doughnut, at the center of which was Black Pus, the solo project of artist and musician Brian Chippendale, whose lunatic drumming, frenzied oscillations, and expansive sparkly energy made us all feel like a happy family of under-bridge dwellers.

Will it happen again next year? Toomey says we’ll have to wait and see.

And what happened to the feeder fish? They’re starting a new life in the Blackstone River, which we hope is now clean enough to support them, despite all those years of industrial pollutants.

—Liz Lee