

BP on Board of Ed: Politics is the reality

■ Molinari says he expects Island representative Jerry Cammarata to do the right thing on critical issues — or else

By REGINALD PATRICK
ADVANCE CITY HALL BUREAU

Like every other agency in this city, the Board of Education functions in a highly political arena, and its members, although theoretically independent, should expect to toe the line on "critical" votes, says Borough President Guy V. Molinari.

"You've got to learn to play the political game to get things done," Molinari said. "If you don't recognize that politics exists everywhere in this city, you're living in a dream world. If you're not ready to play the game, your community is going to lose out."

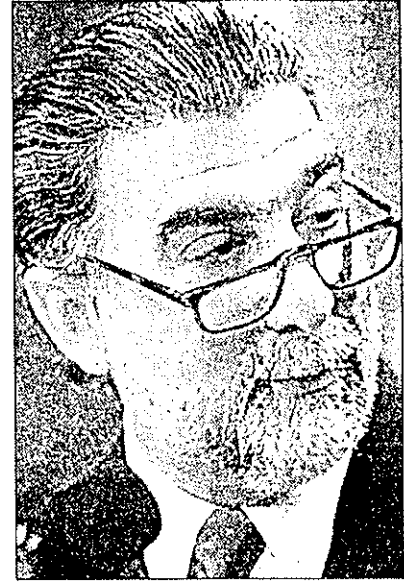
The borough president added that while he doesn't make a habit of routinely telling Staten Island representative Jerry Cammarata how to vote, when it comes to issues "critical" to the borough, he expects his man to do the right thing.

If Cammarata is not ready to take his cue from Borough Hall, Molinari said, he shouldn't be surprised if he gets the ax.

On paper, there is no absolute requirement that appointees have to obey the wishes of the borough presidents who appointed them. But Cammarata, who was named to the central board by Molinari in 1995, has admitted in the past



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that he believes his primary job on the board is to reflect the borough president's thinking.

In January 2000, for instance, at the height of the search for an interim schools chancellor — which led to the selection of Harold Levy — Cammarata remarked: "My obligation is not to think that I'm so independent of mind that the borough president becomes irrelevant. I'm the caretaker of the borough president at the Board of Education."

Cammarata did not return calls for comment yesterday.

Molinari's remarks came in reaction to the furor now circulating around the election of Ninfa Segarra, a former deputy mayor with the Giuliani administration, to board president. She's taken the post formerly held by William Thompson.

Two Democratic borough pres-

idents — Claire Shulman of Queens and C. Virginia Fields of Manhattan — are calling for the resignations of their appointees for the way they voted in the April 4 election.

Ms. Shulman, a political ally of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, wants Terri Thomson's head because Ms. Thomson abstained from voting. Ms. Fields, a Giuliani foe, wants Irving Hamer out because he voted for Ms. Segarra.

Cammarata not only joined those who put Ms. Segarra in the post, he nominated her.

Molinari said the selection of Ms. Segarra had to be considered a critical vote — particularly for Ms. Shulman and himself — because it further cements a strong political relationship with City Hall. From that strong political relationship, Molinari said, dollars flow for educational resources, including several new schools in the capital budget.

"Borough presidents have to use their political clout to get equity for their boroughs," Molinari explained. "You've got to play the game to get things done. I know that Claire Shulman has been aggressive in leveraging her skills in the political arena to get badly needed schools for her borough."

In this borough, Molinari said, there are a record five new schools either up or in the planning stages, including an educational complex planned for a site near the Staten Island Mall.

While Molinari says he has a "wonderful working relationship" with his appointee, if Cammarata, for whatever reason, had taken it into his head to vote against Ms. Segarra, "he would be gone now."

"I wouldn't ask him to resign," Molinari said. "I'd force him to resign. I'd do the same thing Claire Shulman did."

The borough presidents each appoint one member to the board, and the mayor has two picks.

By and large Cammarata, who also heads the city's youth services agency, has been in lockstep with Molinari's policies. But in 1998, the appointee found himself the target of the borough president's ire for not being aggressive enough in rounding up school construction funding for Staten Island.

Three years earlier, Cammarata was taken to the woodshed by Giuliani for voting for the board to consider Suffolk County educator Daniel Domenech for schools chancellor, replacing Ramon Cortines. Domenech was not Giuliani's choice.

The mayor eventually helped Cammarata clarify his thinking on the issue during a meeting with Cammarata and Molinari at Gracie Mansion.

The often the political nature of the central board — and the tendency of members to vote according to a borough president's wishes — has raised some concerns among watchdog groups, though some observers concede the situation is just the nature of the beast.

"I just think appointees have to accept the ground rules," said Eleanor Conforti, chairwoman of Staten Island's Community School Board 31, whose members are directly elected.

"I'm not saying it's right, but the appointees, going in, need to know what's expected of them," Mrs. Conforti continued. "I know the ultimate end is they should be serving the children in the school system. But sometimes that doesn't happen, because people end up serving the borough president."

Gene Russianoff, a senior attorney with the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), jokingly compares the Board of Education to the "Great and Powerful Oz" of the children's tale.

"It's the person behind the curtain who's really running things,"

Russianoff said. "By that, I mean the borough president. If the member doesn't vote the right way, he's quickly shown the door."

A spokesman for Ms. Shulman's office said Ms. Thomson, in considering Ms. Segarra, should have taken into account the help City Hall has given Queens in delivering new schools.

"Terri Thomson should have made the pragmatic choice and voted for her, and not taken a philosophical stand," said Dan Andrews.

Sources said Ms. Thomson had opted to turn thumbs-down because she considers Ms. Segarra untrustworthy and a mayoral puppet. Giuliani appointed Ms. Segarra to the board.

Sources say Ms. Shulman has been pressured by City Hall to seek Ms. Thomson's head, so a replacement friendly to City Hall can take her seat.

Ms. Segarra, who faces another election in June, is serving out the term of Thompson, who stepped down on April 1 to run for comptroller.

Meanwhile, the teachers' union views the central board drama as just so much theatrics — and a distraction from the board's central role of educating children.

United Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten called the situation a soap opera.

Noreen Connell of the Educational Priorities Panel lamented that the board "has always been political."

She noted the irony that two members are in jeopardy over the new board president's election when Ms. Segarra, who previously represented the Bronx, got in trouble with Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, a Democrat, for too often defying Bronx Borough Hall. But later, when she became a mayoral appointee, she gained a reputation for slavishly following the lead of City Hall.