Lee Harvey Oswald at police headquarters in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, the day he shot President John F. Kennedy.        Watch LI auctioneer speak: newsday.com/nassau

The Column
Joye Brown
joye.brown@newsday.com

A multiracial, multietnic group of Nassau County residents recently grilled three county executive candidates on issues ranging from curbing violence to slowing foreclosures.

For the candidates — incumbent Edward Mangano and challengers Thomas Suozzi and Andrew Hardwick, all of whom have held public office — such screenings are part of the campaign process.

But interviewing candidates was new for many of the three dozen or so community members who asked questions and weighed answers over three hours in a Hempstead conference room two weeks ago.

"For most of us, it was something we've never done before," said Sergio Argueta, who, with civil rights attorney Frederick Brewington, has become one of the many faces of The Corridor Counts, a civic group from communities including New Cassel, Uniondale, the villages of Hempstead and Freeport, and Elmont.

Days after the interviews, a judge would knock Hardwick off the ballot in a decision affirmed unanimously by an appellate panel last week.

That left the group grappling with whether to endorse Mangano, a Republican, or Democrat Suozzi for the general election.

Last week, the group — which had endorsed the underdog Democrat, Adam Haber, in a primary — announced its decision: There would be no endorsement at all.

Both candidates had done a couple of positive things while in office," Brewington said of Mangano and Suozzi. "But neither satisfied our need of having issues addressed in the community.

The lack of endorsement could be viewed as a blow for Suozzi, who in his first campaign for county executive in 2001 enjoyed substantial support from black and Latino voters.

But if results from the primary are any indication, the lack of an endorsement likely won't hurt. Turnout was predictably low, but Suozzi won the primary in every corridor community except Hempstead — where the newcomer, Haber, took the village by 125 votes.

At one point yesterday, Suozzi found himself in the position of seeking support from Nassau voters while attending the first-ever Somos El Futuro Black-Brown Alliance Conference in Suffolk.

The goal of the conference, which organizer state Assemb. Phil Ramos (D-Brentwood) said would repeat each year, is to build a coalition among Long Island's only growing demographic — nonwhites — who together comprise about 35 percent of the region's population.

Which likely is why the county executive candidates decided to spend time with The Corridor Counts, an organization that's only a few months old.

While the group decided against endorsing Mangano or Suozzi, it did urge residents to decide on their own. And, on Nov. 5, to turn out to vote.

The Long Island Civic Engagement Table, a nonpartisan group, has scheduled a debate on Thursday in the corridor community of Hempstead.

According to organizers, Suozzi has accepted and Mangano was what they called "a probable" — although the campaign as of yesterday had not formally agreed to participate.

Should Mangano and Suozzi accept, it would be a Nassau first — a debate for the county's top elected post held in a mostly black and Latino community.

The sponsoring group held a similar, first-of-its-kind debate in Suffolk two years ago, when county executive candidates Steve Bellone, a Democrat, and Republican Angie Carpenter faced off in Brentwood.

As Long Island’s demographic change accelerates, so will the need to woo voters. At the conference yesterday, one speaker estimated that hundreds of immigrants, many of them East Asians, became Americans during recent citizenship ceremonies in Suffolk.

But, as speaker after speaker noted at the conference in Islandia, the growing diversity of the population, in and of itself, is not enough.

"It means moving [educating] people to see what power can mean," Lucia Gomez, executive director of LaFuenta, said during a panel on the political and policy ramifications of the region’s changing demographics.

But there’s also a challenge in turning out voters, especially this year — when there is no race for president.

"Why," Gomez asked, "are people not making the connection between their daily lives and local politics?"

Fire that killed 4 ruled accidental

Suffolk County police investigators haven’t said what ignited the Shirley house fire that killed a mother and her three children, but they ruled the blaze accidental yesterday.

The Oct. 11 fire began in the living room of the single-story home, taking the lives of Jennifer McCusker, 4; Aidan Tarbell, 7; and 2-year-old twins Brendan and Ava Jane Mistretta.

The medical examiner determined the cause of the deaths was a combination of smoke inhalation and burns, police said.

The mother was found holding one of the twins in a rear bedroom. She apparently had tried to grab the children and carry them from the house.

The funeral for McCusker and her children was held Friday at St. Jude Roman Catholic Church in Mastic Beach.

— Candice Ferrette