

EDITORIAL | GLOBE ENDORSEMENT

Pressley, Wu, Flaherty, Kelly for at-large City Council

OCTOBER 30, 2013

THE BOSTON City Council has limited powers, but it's not as weak as it sometimes appears. Its recent show of displeasure at having to vote on an arbitrator's award of an overly generous police-union contract may have reflected frustration over being cut out of governance by Mayor Menino. But it made the council appear tentative and fearful of any political backlash.

With a new mayor taking office in January, the council needs to step up. Voters assessing the eight candidates for four at-large council seats should consider which candidates would provide a meaningful check on the new mayor's appointments and initiatives. This would require a mix of confidence, energy, and independence.

Two-term Councilor Ayanna Pressley of Dorchester speaks for victims of violence who might otherwise get lost in the rush of city business. Pressley, the first woman of color to serve on the council, seeks to connect struggling women, girls, and families with social services. But the 39-year-old councilor, who served as an aide to former US Senator John Kerry, has broadened her focus to push for greater city control of liquor licenses. She would give more local entrepreneurs a chance to open restaurants in underserved areas of the city — an important key to economic development.

Pressley is well-positioned to play a larger role in her third term, but she seems reluctant to seek either the council presidency or the council's top budget post. She should do so, and thereby raise her profile as a citywide leader.

First-time candidate Michelle Wu, 28, combines an intellectual approach to government with the practical experience of someone who has run her own business and served as her family's guardian following her mother's illness. Wu, who lives in the South End, excelled as a troubleshooter in the Menino administration, where she

brought more transparency to the city's twisted permitting and licensing procedures for new restaurants. The Harvard Law School graduate has a lot of support in high places, not least because of her work for Elizabeth Warren's successful US Senate campaign. But Wu says she got into the race to make a concrete difference for Bostonians.

"I know what it feels like to be invisible in front of city government," she said.

Michael Flaherty, 44, is enigmatic. The former council president hails from a traditional political family in South Boston. Yet he was a vocal proponent for opening up the city — literally and figuratively — to newcomers during his unsuccessful run for mayor in 2009. Flaherty is knowledgeable on a wide range of issues, which gives credibility to his call for later hours at downtown bars, a "13th year" of public education for struggling students, and mandatory random drug testing for police officers.

Flaherty knows City Hall inside and out. He can't be hoodwinked.

Political newcomer Jack Kelly, 32, has seen Boston from rock bottom. The former high school hockey star from Charlestown descended into the depths of heroin addiction and homelessness while in his late teens. Through hard work and a successful stint as a constituent service coordinator for the Menino administration, he has returned to productivity and good health. Not surprisingly, Kelly wants to expand substance abuse services in Boston. But he also has forward-looking ideas about gentrification. He believes that upscale newcomers can be an asset to the city and wants to help them coexist with the residents of traditional neighborhoods.

The other candidates have less to contribute. Incumbent City Council President Stephen Murphy bills himself as "a steady hand moving forward." Murphy has developed a useful understanding of the city's budget during his 16-year-tenure on the council, including the crafting of a payment-in-lieu-of-taxes plan for nonprofit institutions. But he appears more annoyed than invigorated of late by the challenges of the office, as evidenced by his complaints over the council's role in vetting the police contract. He's also shown a tendency toward politically expedient decisions.

Annissa Essaibi-George has been an effective Dorchester neighborhood activist. She enjoys ample support from organized labor. But her all-or-nothing approach to issues suggests she would be a reflexive and potentially even divisive councilor. Martin Keogh

of West Roxbury is a former high school dropout who straightened out his life and now practices law. A longtime aide to former councilor Peggy Davis-Mullen, Keogh knows the ropes but doesn't offer much in the way of new ideas. Immigration attorney Jeff Ross of the South End vows to be a clear progressive voice on the council, but has otherwise failed to make an overarching case for the job.

All deserve credit for running credible campaigns, but the strongest lineup for next January would be Pressley, Wu, Flaherty, and Kelly. As a group, they represent a mix of political savvy and fresh energy, with links to communities that aren't particularly associated with either of the two mayoral contenders. They can make the council more than a platform for constituent services, but also an ongoing check on the new mayor's administration.

