

Michelle Wu on track to win seat in at-large Boston City Council race

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Attorney Michelle Wu finished fourth in the preliminary race for one of the four at-large City Council seats. She will be seated if she maintains even a fraction of her 13,000-vote lead over the 5th-place finisher. PHOTO BY **YAWU MILLER**

Voters in the Sept. 24 preliminary went into the voting booth with 12 mayoral candidates, 19 at-large district councilors and as many as eight district council candidates to choose from.

Remarkably, political neophyte Michelle Wu managed an impressive fourth-place finish in the at-large field with 29,359 votes — more than 13,000 votes ahead of fifth-place finisher Martin Keough.

It's an impressive lead. If Wu can hold it until the Nov. 5 final election, the Chicago-born daughter of Taiwan-born parents may be the first Asian-American woman elected to citywide office in Boston history.

While Wu's Boston roots may not be deep — she moved here fewer than 10 years ago after graduating from Harvard University — she has made up for her newcomer status with a high-visibility campaign that has brought her to cookouts, festivals, parades and other happenings across the city, in addition to her meet-and-greets at MBTA stations, Dunkin' Donuts, churches, barber shops, hair salons, nail salons and businesses.

Maintaining a hectic campaign schedule is the only way to gain visibility in this year's race, Wu says.

"People are focused on who the next mayor will be," she told the Banner. "I had expected that after the preliminary, people would be more focused on the City Council. That hasn't been the case."

With news coverage of the council race relatively scant, Wu has taken to telling her story on the road, emphasizing personal contact with voters.

"I talk a lot about family," she says. "I talk about being the daughter of immigrants. How my parents came to this country without speaking English, without money. I talk about raising my two sisters for the last few years."

Wu, 28, began raising her younger sisters after her mother became mentally ill five years ago, an experience that she says helped her put herself in other people's shoes.

"I've lived through a lot," she says. "I know what it's like to be struggling. When my mother first got sick, we didn't know what would happen from one day to the next. Now when I see a homeless person who is creating a ruckus and other people look away, I see my mom when she was in her worst moments.

"I know how it is when you're calling the city, looking for services. I want to be that person on the other end of the phone line."

Wu has already had a taste of providing city services. She previously worked in the administration of Mayor Thomas Menino, helping create the city's food truck program and working to streamline the process for permitting the trucks and restaurants.

To help speed up restaurant permitting, Wu switched the city's process from paper to electronic submissions, making it far easier to apply for and receive permits.

Wu says she would like to continue helping restaurants become more profitable by supporting a home rule petition to expand the number of liquor licenses available to them.

"I want to make it easier for smaller restaurants in the neighborhoods to be successful," she says.

Wu says she is also concerned about the increasing cost of housing in Boston and how it's affecting low-income communities.

“There's a lot of new development, but most of it is luxury,” she says. “We have to make sure that affordable housing is built as well as workforce housing.”

Wu says she would work to streamline the permitting process for building new housing to make it less expensive for community development corporations to build affordable housing.

One affordable housing initiative Wu will not likely support is rent control.

“The research I've seen shows that rent control tends to suppress values in the region,” she says.

Wu will face eight other at-large candidates in the final race (listed in order of votes received in the September preliminary): Michael Flaherty, Stephen Murphy, Martin Keogh, Jeffrey Michael Ross, A. Essaibi George and Jack F. Kelly.