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## Reactions Vary as Carrión Eyes White House Post

BY CHLOE TRIBICH

When the 40-year-old Adolfo Carrión was sworn in as Borough President in January 2002, his political career appeared bound for the stars.

The Bronx Democratic machine, led by Roberto Ramirez, had selected Carrión, a young, articulate City Council member, as its candidate over party veteran Jose Rivera, a state assemblyman who had mentored Ramirez and other young Puerto Rican political leaders.

The decision paid off. Carrión, in just his second political campaign, narrowly prevailed over well-known Democratic competitors Pedro Espada, Jr. and June Eisland.



Adolfo Carrión with Peter Kalikow, right, and E. Virgil Conway of the MTA in 2004. (Norwood News file photo)

At Carrión's inauguration, City Comptroller Bill Thompson said, "We're looking at another citywide elected official."

### Destined for Big Stage?

Carrión's career now seems poised on the brink of advancement beyond city politics. In December, during a speech at Yale, he announced he would soon be accepting a top position in the Obama administration, throwing his candidacy for this year's City Comptroller race (for which he's raised more than a \$1 million) into question.

Rumors swirled about Carrión becoming secretary of Housing and

Urban Development, but with that post now filled by Shaun Donovan, the city's former housing commissioner, the borough president is reportedly Obama's choice to head a new White House Office on Urban Policy.



Adolfo Carrión and wife Linda Baldwin at the Bronx Ball in 2005. (Norwood News file photo)

At press time, Obama had not named his urban policy czar. Valerie Jarrett, a senior presidential adviser, said in an e-mail that "no decision has been made" on the post. **[Update: *the Daily News* is reporting that Carrión will become President Obama's new director of urban policy.**]

With term limits extended, the borough president could still decide to stay where he is. But with his hat still in the ring for comptroller and the White House rumors on full boil, Carrión has scheduled what will probably be his final State of the Borough address for Feb. 20 at Lehman College.

Carrión's rise has been steady. The son of a Pentecostal preacher, Carrión graduated from the evangelical Kings College, serving a stint as an associate pastor before earning his master's in Urban Planning from Hunter College. He began his political climb as district manager of Community Board 5 in the west Bronx. In 1997, backed by the party machine, he was elected to the City Council in the 14th District. He served only one term before running for borough president.

With little formal policymaking role, the borough president is primarily the borough's advocate-in-chief. (Before the City Charter revision in 1989, borough presidents wielded tremendous power over budgets on the Board of Estimate.). So, it's difficult to quantify Carrión's performance over the past seven years. Still, during his tenure, Carrión has overseen a handful of controversial big-ticket development projects that will likely define his Bronx legacy.

### **Boom or Bust?**

Carrión often highlights the borough's progress in development, telling audiences that the "Bronx is booming." Like the rest of the city, during Carrión's tenure, the Bronx enjoyed a construction boom, including three mammoth projects: the new Yankee Stadium, Gateway Mall and the Croton Water Filtration Plant.

On the filtration plant, Carrión mostly ceded the political stage to Assemblyman and Party Chair Jose Rivera, who cut a controversial deal that resulted in over \$200 million for Bronx park rehabs and paved the way for the vastly over-budget and highly controversial project in Van Cortlandt Park. But he was the cheerleader-in-chief for the Yankee Stadium and Gateway Mall projects and took heat for his handling of both.

In his 2007 State of the Borough address, Carrión highlighted the "Yankee Stadium Neighborhood Development Plan," which included "a community benefits agreement (CBA) between the Yankee organization and the neighborhood for community based programming."

Although the agreement does include some tangible benefits, including an \$800,000-a-year fund for local nonprofit groups, it was criticized for being crafted behind closed doors without input from community leaders or grassroots groups. The local community board opposed it. The agreement, which included exaggerated job creation projections, was also faulted for being unenforceable.

Meanwhile, the new stadium is being built with the help of hefty public financing on the neighborhood's primary parkland and the old stadium has yet to be razed to make way for replacement community ballfields. Many other promised replacement parks are far behind schedule.

"He neglected the community in favor of giving the Yankees what they wanted," said Joyce Hogi, a longtime community leader who fought the plan.

Lukas Herbert, one of several former Community Board 4 members who opposed the stadium project and whose term was subsequently not renewed by Carrión, has e-mailed the White House expressing opposition to a federal appointment for the borough president.

“Displacing many acres of parkland to give a parking lot to one of the richest sports teams in the world, if that is what you stand for — that is insane,” he said, referring to the Yankee Stadium deal. Carrión also promised a new ice skating rink — its status is unclear — and a sports-themed high school, which never got off the ground.

Still, the stadium has some local supporters. D. Lee Ezell, now the chair of CB 4, has known Carrión since the mid-1980s. She insisted the media coverage of the deal was unfair and cited Carrión’s work opposing the construction of schools on contaminated sites in Mott Haven as one example of his community credentials.

“I don’t think the president could make a better choice when it comes to urban policy,” Ezell said.

Still, the CBA for the Gateway Mall was also widely criticized for being crafted without much community input, and advocates say penalties for the mall’s developer, The Related Companies, for non-compliance is negligible.

The CBA for that project “was so bad that most people ran away from it,” said Richard Lipsky of the Neighborhood Retail Alliance. Only three of the 18 community groups involved from the beginning of the project signed off on the agreement.

Related officials admitted the agreement wasn’t perfect, but said the community would still benefit from it, mostly through job training and placement programs.

Carrión refused interview requests for this article.

### **Housing, Schools and Jobs**

Aside from the signature big development projects, Carrión’s administration has also touched on many other areas of public policy.

**The creation of affordable housing — particularly his efforts at promoting environmentally-sound development — have drawn Carrión praise. “Adolfo has put the Bronx on the vanguard of green affordable housing,” said Nancy Biberman, founder and director of the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation, adding that WHEDCo’s latest building, Intervale Green, received funding through one of his initiatives.**

Ronn Jordan, a leader and former president of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC), a major grassroots group in the borough known for pressuring and placing “demands” on elected officials at public meetings, praised Carrión, commending him in particular for allocating \$66,000 to the Leadership Institute, a high school designed by the Coalition’s youth arm.

Lenny Caro, CEO of the Bronx Chamber of Commerce, said the borough president’s online job bank, “Bronx at Work,” is “tremendously helpful.” However, at press time there were no current job postings on the Web site (due to the bad economy, Caro said). Links to “news” and “event alerts” were also blank and the link to “internships” appeared broken.

“I’ve rarely heard of anyone using [Bronx at Work],” said South Bronx businessman Julio Pabon. “So many people here don’t even have computer access,”

Carrión is widely credited with boosting the ranks and consequently the activism of the borough’s most local form of government, the volunteer community boards, by encouraging residents to apply for membership.

“[Carrión] opened the process by empowering new people to come on,” said Greg Faulkner, chair of Community Board 7, which covers a chunk of the northwest Bronx. Faulkner also gives Carrión credit for not objecting to the board’s choice of Fernando Tirado to be the board’s new district manager, a position that often goes to someone with political connections.

On the other hand, Carrión was widely criticized for refusing to renew the memberships of Herbert and the other CB 4 members who opposed the Yankee Stadium plan.

### **Looking to the Future**

Regardless of Carrión’s performance on any number of issues as borough president, most of his political colleagues, even those he’s had tensions with, offer their blessings.

“We all try in different ways to look out for the needs of the Bronx,” Jose Rivera said. “I wish [Carrión] well. I think he would never forget the Bronx.”

State Senator Pedro Espada, Jr., Carrión’s onetime rival, loves the idea of an Obama post for Carrión.

“It’d be wonderful to have two Bronxites, one in Albany and one in D.C., to plan and establish urban policy and deliver resources,” Espada said, referring to his own posts as Housing Committee chair and vice president of the Senate for Urban Policy.

But Fernando Ferrer, who preceded Carrión in office and took a tougher line with the Yankees, was somewhat reluctant to speak.

“I don’t make it a practice to comment on my successor,” Ferrer said, finally adding that “sustainable development and green roofs are two of the better things [Carrión has] done.”

Council Member Helen Foster, who represents the neighborhood surrounding Yankee Stadium, was one of the few elected officials who opposed the new stadium.

“I don’t have any disparaging remarks,” she said. “As Borough President he had to, or should have, listened to the masses, but in this [federal] job his responsibility [would be] directly to the president — it’s like apples and oranges. Time will be the judge.