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Democrats eyeing City Hall get lost on the West Side

THE FOUR DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES for mayor believe the city's future depends on stopping Michael Bloomberg's plan to build a new stadium on the West Side of Manhattan, though some of them are perfectly willing to spend almost the same amount of money to construct one in Queens.

All of them say something is wrong with the city's educational system, though it isn't clear what specific strategies

they have to make things better, except that they wouldn't require teachers to help fix the problems. Many of them want to increase taxes, but they don't plan to use the money to plug the \$3 billion hole the mayor has left in future years.

They all want to keep Wal-Mart out of the city, to protect small businesses that pay lower wages, offer no health insurance to their workers, and charge New Yorkers sky-high prices.

Virginia Fields, who is rapidly gaining in the polls, says the worst thing Mayor Bloomberg has done in the last four years is to cut back on the city's Meals on Wheels program. Huh?

With positions like that, it shouldn't be a surprise that sud-



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denly Mayor Bloomberg's status with voters is improving; he's trouncing former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer by 13 points in the latest poll. The Democrats have simply misread the voters—how sophisticated they are about what's best for New York and what they really care about.

Consider what the candidates aren't talking about—crime, the economy and downtown.

Does anyone doubt that the most important issue to average people is whether they feel safe? Crime has declined during each year Bloomberg has been in office, despite a reduction in police and the diversion of thousands of other officers to terrorism duty. There isn't anything to criticize, and most

New Yorkers are grateful.

If the challengers think that avoiding that topic is a good idea, why do they ignore the economy as well? Things are better, sure, but job growth has been mediocre. Their silence is an indication that they can't bring themselves to endorse any major steps the mayor hasn't taken—like cutting taxes. It's very significant that all four Democrats have been silent on the rebuilding of downtown, and were caught napping by recent setbacks there. Probably, that's because they are as obsessed about the West Side as the mayor.

Wal-Mart is the issue on which they have been drinking the Kool-Aid, all because they want the support of the unions that are fighting Wal-Mart's entry into New York. What they say is absurd, defending small businesses that every poor New Yorker knows take advantage of them every day. As Wal-Mart edges closer to the city—a new store will open soon in White Plains—more and more New Yorkers will head to the suburbs to shop.

As for the stadium, the issue will be decided this summer and will be forgotten by November. True, it is a long way to Election Day, but the Democrats need to retool their messages, and soon.