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Naakh Vysoky has become something of a ward boss in his Brighton elderly housing complex. (Globe Staff Photo / David L. Ryan)

Ward boss or 'simple man,' he gets out the vote

By Yvonne Abraham, Globe Staff | March 1, 2005

In recent elections, something peculiar has happened in Ward 21, Precinct 13. In that little Brighton neighborhood, voters have turned out in the hundreds, when their neighbors in most nearby precincts have shown up in much smaller numbers.

The heart of that miniature electoral powerhouse is the Jewish Community Housing for the Elderly on Wallingford Road, a complex of brown brick buildings that house about 1,000 Russian immigrants.

And the unofficial head of that powerhouse is Naakh Vysoky, an 83-year-old Ukrainian with white hair and a shrugging modesty who has become a kind of old-time ward boss, corralling and delivering his people for the right candidate. He coaches them into US citizenship, registers them to vote, and makes it clear when he likes a politician. Where Vysoky goes, hundreds of Russian immigrant voters on Wallingford Road follow.

"This is the old-fashioned way," said state Representative Kevin G. Honan, a Brighton Democrat. "This is the way our neighborhoods used to be. His credibility in that community is extraordinary. You'd be hard-pressed to find another man like him in

Boston."

Now everybody is watching to see what direction Vysoky's people will go on March 15, when a Democratic primary will be held in the race to replace Representative Brian Golden. In a field of four Democratic candidates and in an election that will likely draw a low turnout, those 400 or so voters could be crucial to victory.

Vysoky has helped politicians from Mayor Thomas M. Menino to US Representative Michael E. Capuano, but this year, the candidates in the special election are on their own. The retired physician, battling ill health, has hung up his boss's hat, at least for now, and says he won't be giving anyone the nod this time.

"I know these guys. All of them are young guys, every [one] of them wants to succeed. Everybody deserves it," he said. "It's broken my heart. When I help them, they have a big chance to win."

Vysoky's insistence that he will not endorse a candidate hasn't stopped the candidates from calling, however.

"It's certainly an important part of the district," said Tim Schofield, one of the Democrats running, who is hosting a coffee for the community center residents today. "It is such a cluster of people who regularly vote."

And it certainly hasn't stopped Vysoky's neighbors from asking him who to vote for on March 15. "I cannot go out," he said. "They ask me, ask me."

He says the residents of Wallingford Road, who have a polling station in one of their buildings, will turn out without his prodding. "They got used to it," he said. "I have good voters, organized voters."

Vysoky's Brighton duchy is part of a Boston greatly changed since the heyday of the Irish ward bosses and not just because the Irish accents have been replaced by Russian ones. These days, the traditional methods of ward politics draw some scrutiny.

In a 2002 state representative race in the precinct, there were accusations that Russian and Chinese interpreters were coercing voters into pulling levers for certain candidates and that some supporters were stealing their opponents' literature.

In recent weeks, lawyers from the US Department of Justice have been calling former candidates in the district and asking questions about whether non-English-speaking voters were given adequate translation services in the precinct, as required by law.

A spokesman for the Department of Justice said the Civil Rights Division is "looking into the matter," but that an investigation has not been launched. City officials have not been contacted by the department, and several city sources suggested that the Department of Justice had been urged to make calls on the matter by one of the camps contesting the

special election, in the interests of depressing turnout on March 15. Old-time skulduggery, they called it.

Vysoky dismissed the allegations. Nobody made anybody vote for anyone, he said. No

"You cannot dictate to the people," he said. "You cannot say, 'Go vote for this one.'

Still, there is plenty of the traditional ward boss about Vysoky. The man who describes

jammed with pictures of him palling around with all manner of prominent politician: Governor Mitt Romney; Menino, former House speaker Thomas M. Finneran, and current House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi, to name a few.

"All of them, they are my friends," Vysoky said.

Also traditional: the former physician's firm belief in compensation for his voters'

"These guys," he said, meaning the politicians, "they have to know that for 400 voters to

have to do good when they are elected. And then they come, and they are elected again. It has to be for each other. The people don't forget."

When the MBTA planned to take away the Green Line stop closest to his complex,

now, he is working on better snow removal.

All day, the phone in Vysoky's apartment rings loudly. And every time it did yesterday

Some are sick and need advice. Some have had relatives die and want help with funeral arrangements. "Every month somebody dies," he said.

He wonders how long he can go on himself. His eyes and legs are giving him trouble. He

"My clock goes," he said. "The politics, they don't miss me."

But he clearly misses the politics.

"I don't know in the future. It's coming Mayor Menino has to be elected," he said. "I like

