

## Queens delegation to hear residents' budget worries

By Corey Bearak

Next Wednesday at City Hall and Thursday at York College in Jamaica, the Queens' City Council delegation will hold public hearings on Mayor Michael Bloomberg's proposed executive budget released a few days before.



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This provides an opportunity for community groups, advocates and residents to express their concerns on the budget and its priorities, as well as their preferences and programs and projects not funded in the mayor's draft that they hope Council members will take up the cause for.

Queens (and city) residents should use this opportunity not just to make sure their Council members or borough president funds local essential senior, youth and cultural programs but to reshape the budget so it makes sense.

Readers who live in boroughs other than Queens or have interests in other boroughs should contact that borough's Council delegation through one of those Council members. Queens residents can contact their Council member or call 212-788-9153.

The City Hall hearing runs from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Queens hearing at York College on Guy R. Brewer Boulevard, north of Merrick Boulevard (E Train to Parsons/Archer), runs from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Bring 20 copies of your statement to the hearings.

Many revenues and savings I identified last year remain out there as causes awaiting advocates. This includes personal income tax reform that raises \$1 billion, 90 percent from millionaires and nothing — zero — from working- and middle-class New Yorkers. It also eliminates city income tax for lower-income earners (under \$30,000 annually).

Real property tax reform raises more than the mayor's 18.5 percent property tax hike that hit homeowners 22 percent but without raising our own property taxes. It also funds co-op/condo tax reform.

Other revenue measures and programmatic changes realize more money.

Identifying revenues and efficiencies does not mean we need to or should spend all that "found" money. It makes sense to very conservatively identify revenues. Some advocate higher taxes to pay for programs; others advocate lower taxes even if it means programs may go on the chopping block.

Neither drastic approach works. Neither really happens, and sometimes elements of either occur. Either way, services suffer and we feel the impact. In addition to taxing us, the budget determines funding for borough schools, libraries, parks, senior programs such as Meals on Wheels and Fire and Police staffing.

Past mayoral budgets have hurt our libraries, particularly the hours they are open. My current commitments have kept me from my local library for more than two months. If my Bellerose branch opens on weekends, I can get there.

If you are not free during the day, work or attend with after-school commitments — as do many of the high school girls Ira Epstein and I manage on the State Senator Frank Padavan BlueJays Glen Oaks Little League softball team — you might not get to the library even on the two days it's open until 8 p.m. As my late Grandpa Charlie would say, "It stinks."

And the Meals on Wheels saga continues. The Council, as part of a deal to delay the absentee owner tax (a personal favorite, not just because I proposed it more than a decade ago), got the mayor to delay Department for the Aging Commissioner Edwin Santiago's scheme to deliver frozen meals to needy seniors. Expect the mayor's budget to include this bad proposal based on contracts DFTA plans to consummate in the Bronx.

The budget talks must also address taxes. The delay in the absentee owner tax involves more than foregoing revenues since other revenues exceeded estimates. It means a lost increment in achieving real estate tax reform.

Another concern is the state of Queens' green spaces. Parks advocates descended on City Hall April 21 to highlight the need to better fund our parks. New Yorkers for Parks organized Park Advocacy Day for the public to lobby their Council members.

Residents must also urge their Council members to consider how cuts to Fire and Police staffing may seriously compromise our safety. Fire safety still matters; many advocate reopening closed firehouses and restoring fire marshals who investigate suspicious fires.

And despite staffing decreases, the NYPD, led by Commissioner Ray Kelly and First Deputy Commissioner George Grasso, continues to hold the line on violent crime while adding anti-terrorism to its portfolio. Staffing reductions may impede the NYPD's long-term ability to address quality-of-life and non-violent crimes that the average New Yorkers remain more likely to encounter.

Then there's education. Our city awaits the funds due from the state from the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit. Actual state aid increases may not meet city expectations despite the legal mandate. My experience with the lawsuits to enforce the city's 1989 Recycling Law suggests that governments prefer to exhaust all legal avenues before conceding to spend new dollars. A shame but true.

The city budget must also address health care, housing, homelessness, economic and community development, CUNY, environmental protection (don't forget to testify April 27 at 9:30 a.m. against the 5.5 percent water rate hike), building safety, planning and transportation.

The public ought to know it need not take a pass on the budget. Make your views known.

Corey Bearak is an attorney and adviser on government, community and public affairs. He is also active in Queens civic and political circles.

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