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The Public Ought to Know: Council to hold public hearings on budget

By Corey Bearak
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Corey Bearak

For three weeks next month the City Council holds public budget hearings. These sessions will allow council members to question city commissioners on how the preliminary budget the mayor proposed last month affects services and projects. They'll also review - working off the Preliminary Mayor's Management Report - how effectively agencies operated during the current fiscal year's first several months. While each committee session provides for public comment, savvy city resident might contact their council member or the chairman or members of the relevant council committees to raise issues of concern or share expertise or insights that can help shape a better budget. The Finance Committee chaired by Councilman David Weprin (D-Hollis) kicks off the proceedings at 10 a.m. on Thursday, March 3. The Office of Management and Budget testifies on the capital, expense, revenue and contract (The Contracts Committee joins in on this item.) budgets. When the Finance Department follows at 12:15 p.m., council members can question the mayor's rebate plans, the need to reform assessment practices that cheat taxpayers of revenues that can either reduce what we pay, address the city's long-term budget deficit or both.

Our representatives can ask about the inequalities that the agency allows to continue so some homeowners and cooperative owners in some of our ritziest neighborhoods pay taxes equivalent to what working and middle-

class homeowners and cooperative owners pay. Next up at 1:15 p.m. will be the Department of Design and Construction, manages much of the city's capital construction program and any efficiencies found can save millions.

The city comptroller and Independent Budget Office follow in 30-minute increments to comment on revenues and expenditure estimates and identify any risks they find in the mayor's proposal. These can include questionable assumptions about expected savings from agency actions and productivity, assumptions of state and federal assistance, labor savings and pension costs. If the hearings follow the schedule, the public may comment at 3 p.m.

Also on March 3, the Oversight and Investigations Committee headed by Councilman Eric Gioia (D-Sunnyside) looks at the city Department of Investigation at noon and the Aging Committee follows at 1:30 p.m. on the Department for the Aging. Council members might explore the so-called pilot program that delivers frozen instead of fresh meals to Bronx seniors.

On Friday, March 4, the Education and Finance Committee looks at the Department of Education and the School Construction Authority. The state comptroller's audit suggesting the DOE realized less than it claims by its administrative changes will certainly get attention. Council members may also press both agencies on school construction to alleviate overcrowding and how the closing of Catholic parochial schools in Brooklyn and Queens might affect public schools.

On Monday, March 7, the Government Operations Committee looks at the city Board of Elections, the Department of Records and Information Services (the city's archives), the Law Department, the Campaign Finance Board, the Financial Information Services Agency, the Department of Citywide Administrative Services, which handles agency purchasing and administers civil service exams, and the community boards.

That same day, the Economic Development Committee chaired by Councilman James Sanders (D-Laurelton) looks at the Economic Development Corporation and the Department of Small Business Services. It could review proposals to fund the Far West Side Stadium since the Industrial Development Agency slated to collect payments in lieu of taxes to finance that scheme works through EDC.

On Tuesday, March 8, the Housing and Buildings Committee reviews the

Housing Preservation and Development Department, the Department of Buildings and the New York City Housing Authority. The committee can consider affordable housing initiatives, the impact of the Housing Authority on development and the failure to use a \$20 million revenue surplus generated by the fees for service the agency charges to provide more plan examiners and inspectors.

The Youth Committee looks at the Department of Youth and Community Development that morning and that afternoon the Sanitation and Solid Waste Management Committee oversees the Sanitation Department. On Thursday, March 10, the Health Committee will review the medical examiner, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Health and Hospitals Corporation. The Standards and Ethics Committees chaired by Councilwoman Helen Sears (D-Elmhurst) looks at the Conflict of Interest Board and the Mental Health, Mental Retardation, Alcoholism, Drug Abuse and Disability Services Committee also looks at the Health Department.

The City Council's Web site - <http://www.nyccouncil.info> - includes information on the remaining hearings and should be reviewed for possible schedule changes.

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