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The Public Ought to Know: Columnist bids farewell for political assignment

By Corey Bearak

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Corey Bearak

"It's too late to take the 'x' from yesterday," sings Richie Furay in Poco's "Consequently, So Long."

When TimesLedger Publisher Steve Blank and Managing Editor Roz Liston first discussed with me what became "The Public Ought to Know" just over two years ago, we agreed to suspend this weekly commentary if I became involved in the race for City Hall.

Early in the morning on Mother's Day I received an e-mail about essentially joining the campaign of Fernando Ferrer in whose Bronx administration I served 23 months. Interestingly, for those who value coincidences and/or numerology, this column also ran for 23 months. My favorite number remains 18.

After family left and we cleaned up, I called back and agreed to meet the following afternoon. I received an offer which I needed to discuss with the family and my partners in my various consulting projects. After a meeting at the end of the following week, I accepted. I spoke to Steve and Roz about a concluding column. I thank them for this opportunity and the bigger opportunity to share my insights and recommendation on issues that affect

our quality of life and more. I also thank my copy editors, first Heather Scroope and for the last several months, Rashmi Vaish.

Readers may also have learned a few things besides some issues that matter to me. I am proud of my family and friends, my involvements and my music - that includes not being shy about pressing for the induction of Poco into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

As to what matter most, I probably wrote more on the Far West Side stadium and the better site that remains available in Willets Point than any other. Ordinarily, one, maybe two commentaries should be enough, but when elected officials and their top deputies stay their misguided course, an independent voice not beholden to a cable company might help embolden others to speak for reason.

Since my first days in city government, I delved into budget and fiscal issues. Many commentaries here reflected that interest, including the need for the public to weigh in. Don't forget to keep playing "Annoy!"

Right through this week, I continued to review real property values and taxes of properties sold each week. I look for the discrepancies that unfortunately still exist in a confused and inequitable New York City real property tax assessment system. It needs a fix. I proposed sound reforms.

Interestingly, the mayor's \$400 rebate validates my proposal, since both rely on the STAR program to identify those who own and occupy their homes (including co-ops and condos). Almost two years ago, Mayor Michael Bloomberg's finance commissioner disputed the merit of my plan to rely on STAR. In less than a year, she embraced it - perhaps under duress. I hope to further develop a reform proposal that protects communities, also helps tenants and stops screwing middle class homeowners and co-op shareowners who live on the premises they own.

Who would know when I wrote on water rates I'd be the only witness at the Queens hearing. Borough President Helen Marshall, to her credit, did submit a statement opposing the continued hikes. New Yorkers need to follow this issue and press for reform of a rate-setting process that gives the illusion of openness when folks stay away from hearings that they see as a prelude to a done deal.

I will miss the opportunity to weigh in on charter revision. As I write about 10 days before each column appears in print and on the web, I remain concerned about the commitment I exacted from the mayor's Charter Revision Commission to give timely notice the public - especially here in Queens - about opportunities to comment on its proposals. I profess a liking for open government and inclusion of the community in government decision; charter changes require our scrutiny.

When I worked at the City Council, I enjoyed the opportunity to work with a hardworking councilman who chaired committees on the environment and later public safety. I remember him for what he achieved in both areas, rather than the aftermath of a failed borough president race after I left for the Bronx. Writings on recycling, solid waste management, clean air and clean water reflect what I worked on and learned during that time. Similarly, later work on police-community relations and criminal justice reforms found their roots during seven years working with the Council's public safety committee.

These and other issues matter. Let me know what interests you. As I signed off my last Hofstra Law School "Conscience" editorial, "Later."

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