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Beeps must strategically tackle city spending plans

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by Corey Bearak



When I worked for the City Council, I had mixed views about the office of the borough president. The position carried a lot of power and influence. If Council members wanted capital projects in their districts, they sought out the borough president. In what some folks view as the good old days, each of the five “beeps,” shorthand for BPs, held a vote each on a hybrid legislative-executive Board of Estimate.

The mayor, the comptroller and the predecessor to the public advocate, the City Council president, each wielded two votes. They adopted the expense and capital budget with the City Council.

The board was the final arbiter on land use and zoning matters. Mayors often joined with at least four of the borough presidents against the other two citywide officials who coveted the city’s top job. A smart negotiator could do well.

The locating of city offices in Corona and Long Island City and the investment in downtown Jamaica resulted from our borough president making deals with City Hall. Queens fared well under this government scheme.

Then the bottom fell out. Brooklyn residents successfully sued the Board of Estimate system on one-man, one-vote grounds. These folks had a point. Why should the city’s most populous borough, Brooklyn, have the same one vote on the board as Staten Island — with about 15 percent of its population?

Former Mayor Edward Koch responded by appointing a Charter Revision Commission to propose a new city government. Some advocated simply weighting the vote of borough presidents. Nassau County’s Board of Supervisors operated that way. Others wanted to weaken the borough presidents.

Council members saw an opportunity to amass greater power. Many of my fellow civic leaders, including many now holding the highest leadership positions in the Queens Civic Congress, expressed concern about a diminished influence on the borough; many recalled when the borough presidents oversaw the parks, sewer and highway departments.

What happened should surprise no one. The Charter Commission eliminated the Board of Estimate and shifted most of its legislative powers — budget and land use — to the Council. The commission gave the mayor the board’s executive powers, which he previously shared with seven others, but retained the borough presidents in a somewhat different capacity.

Only now, with no current borough presidents holding office before the charter changes, can one make a determination if the office merits retention. The mayor and the Council cut the budgets of the borough presidents significantly since term limits took hold.

Last year the Council allowed the mayor to eliminate funds for senior, youth, housing and other community programs. These programs were funded through the Department of Youth and Community Development but were allocated by the borough presidents.

Similar funds allocated by the borough presidents through the Department for the Aging also appeared at risk but survived this year's new budget.

So what's a beep to do? Money and programs matter. Many pay attention to charter-mandated borough president pieces of the budget pie. This includes 5 percent of the additions to the capital budget apportioned by borough size and population and new needs in the expense budget that mayors manipulate to keep low. The ability to fund remains nice but makes a borough executive just a super Council member.

Here's the challenge. The City Charter invests in borough presidents' power to specifically and strategically influence events, programs and projects. The City Charter requires borough presidents to monitor service delivery, review all borough capital projects, advise the mayor on the formulation of the preliminary and executive budgets, provide technical assistance to community boards and identify the borough's strategic needs.

These powers, if not exercised, cheat the public and could put the institution of the borough presidency at risk of extinction.

The exercise of these charter-derived powers could demonstrate the need, usefulness, relevancy and benefits to the city and the public at large of maintaining the borough presidents.

Monthly Borough Board (composed of Council members and community board chairs) and Borough Cabinet (composed of the community board district managers) meetings offer a mechanism to implement a strategic plan and around which to set meaningful timetables for tasks.

Many millions of dollars of bridge, highway and road projects not funded by the Council or the borough president get funded in the city budget.

The cuts to each borough president's office make it difficult to staff up at the level I know necessary to provide the strategic oversight the charter intends and requires. By exercising their strategic policy and planning powers, each borough president takes the driver's seat when it comes to city spending — particularly programs and projects.

Separate infrastructure meetings could focus on schools, transportation, sewers, parks, libraries, cultural institutions and housing. Separate programmatic meetings could focus on youth programs, seniors, employment and training programs, land use, crime, policing and health.

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