

The Public Ought to Know: 'Stinkers' can clear air via city budget modification

By Corey Bearak

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Grandpa Charlie Bearak used the word “stinker” for it; more often than not, I would apply a gutter expletive of the one-syllable variation. Either noun applied in cases where folks lied or obfuscated. It certainly applies to a lot of acts we see, hear about and experience in business, in life and in how our government serves us. At the city level, Grandpa’s “stinkers” get an opportunity to remove the stench.

By law, the city’s budget must remain in balance; the City Charter even requires agencies to get official approvals based on the need to adjust spending in categories that might exceed original approvals. This process, a budget modification, requires the mayor to propose the change; the City Council either rejects or accepts it, but the Council cannot, as it does with the annual budget, make amendments.

As a result, the negotiations over major modifications require the mayor to submit a revised modification that includes changes sought by the Council, and the Council adopts the new document in its entirety.

The modification forthcoming this year involves a number of interesting dynamics. The November 2002 Real Property Tax hike, according to a report by City Comptroller Bill Thompson, accounts for 93 percent (\$1.3 billion) of the \$1.4 billion surplus projected this fiscal year, which ends in June.

Already the mayor and Council debate in the media over what taxes to cut. The mayor wants to cut the absentee owner tax slated to collect about \$175 million, according to the Independent Budget Office. If fully implemented (see my commentary at DrumMajorInstitute.org), this reform could realize billions for the city, which should mean property tax cuts for many who read this. The Council, which merits praise for holding steadfast here, has proposed further property tax reductions for seniors.

The debate need not start and end with taxes; the “stinkers” get a chance to clean up their mistakes in service delivery.

In terms of stinkers, let’s start with trash. As Community Board 13 Chair Rich Hellenbrecht e-mailed me recently, “Since I’m a Monday pickup, over the years I’ve always noticed many holidays, however, where there was no pickup until Thursday’s regular pickup.”

I e-mailed Rich after I tried out the new 311 system because my household Election Day Tuesday's trash did not get collected until the second weekly collection day, Friday. Faced with a similar situation with my large plastic trash can already overflowing on the ensuing Tuesday, Veterans Day, and a kitchen garbage overflowing and needing to be put out, I called 311 to find out when to expect my trash pickup.

Essentially, I learned the city reverted to the Koch-era trash pick-up policy of skipping collection days when they fall on a holiday. I did not recall any notice on this in the budget process or aftermath (and I was involved as a consultant to a councilman during the last budget process).

Since 311 is new and a top mayoral aide had touted it as obviating community boards, through my 311 call, I sought an explanation in writing for why there was no public news that residents would miss collections when their regular trash collection day fell on a holiday. I said a response could be regular or e-mail.

The initial 311 operator courteously punted me to an equally courteous Department of Sanitation 311 operator who said I would need to mail a letter or go to the nyc.gov Web site to get a written response. I asked for a supervisor. She was also very nice and explained that the policy was not to take requests that required a written response.

Before City Hall tries to replace community boards, let's be thankful that our local community boards will take a complaint and get a response; the same goes with any of our electeds. I explained as much to the 311 supervisor who agreed to take my e-mail and regular addresses. I also identified my media affiliation (and its Web site) and advised this would make my column.

The supervisor could not promise that the agency or City Hall would respond. I do not blame workers for policy that others make. I thanked the supervisor for being helpful and explained I would not in any way identify the supervisor when I write. Maybe City Hall will respond to this column or, even better, use the budget modification to ensure the Department of Sanitation gets the necessary resources so it never skips trash collections on a holiday.

You may want to suggest another service that the stinkers need to fix. No doubt the City Council and City Hall want to clear away any stench.

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