

The Public Ought to Know: Boro old, young should be left out of budget dance

By Corey Bearak

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The City Council's Finance Division identified essential services the mayor's budget fails to include, such as \$11.8 million for those pertaining to libraries, \$11 million for seniors, \$18.5 million for youth, \$13 million for the Department of Parks and \$16 million for CUNY (\$5.5 million for scholarships).

City Hall retorts those programs are not at risk, and it's not for the mayor to include programs and services the Council added during past budget negotiations and we ought not to worry. It remains grossly irresponsible of mayors past and present to fail to baseline programs that provide essential services.

This happens all too often, and the public — especially our more fragile citizens, seniors and youth — suffers. I yearn for the day when New Yorkers have a mayor who stops playing games and releases a realistic budget.

When mayors cut services for seniors, children, schools and libraries as well as cultural programs and housing and neighborhood preservation initiatives, they know exactly what they are doing. They divert the City Council from looking throughout city government and mayoral agencies to identify less worthy programs or services that cry out for more efficient delivery. The focus becomes restoring these programs; most times nearly all the programs get saved.

On the other hand, think about the local senior services agency. When the mayor announces cuts, how can local programs presume the Council will always restore the money? In 2002, some senior and youth programs did not get restored.

I have my suspicions about who to blame for failing to restore these programs funded through the offices of each borough president. And that's the way the mayor would like it: Blame some council members. But who made the cut in the first place? Who put those senior programs at risk by not baselining their funding? It was not the Council or its members. The buck stops at a cubicle on the second floor of the west wing of City Hall.

The fiscal folks at senior service and youth agencies, our libraries and other community-based programs must budget responsibly. If City Hall releases a budget with fewer funds for those programs, they plan a retrenchment.

They often initiate program or service cuts in the current budget year. As a result, even if the adopted budget restores the cuts in the mayor's preliminary budget, the public experiences gaps in services.

The stark example of fewer hours of operation of our branch libraries in Queens that occurs each summer galls me and should upset you, too. When school is out, when the summer heat can be unbearable, our air-conditioned local community branch libraries are least available. Just dumb!

If anything, library hours should be longer during the summer. And again our mayor seeks to close the Queens and Prospect Park zoos. Why?

The failure to baseline these community programs often means delays in certain seasonal programs that serve our youth. I recall too many instances of council-funded after-school and evening programs starting after the holiday break rather than early autumn. Why?

City agencies and the local programs need to develop contracts during the spring for timely start-ups in the fall. Programs that await the results of the budget dance often cannot develop and submit their contract document until the summer and sometimes into the fall.

So what is there to do? Make sound budget management an issue. But don't let them define sound management. You do the defining. Tell them, the mayor and the Council — but especially hizzoner — that you will not tolerate the annual cut and restoration dance that creates unnecessary and hurtful gaps in essential services for our elderly and our youth.

Tell them to leave these programs alone, except to improve them.

Demand they look at the entire city budget; look at the revenues they forego by failing to seek legislative reforms that may be possible in Albany (and Washington).

This includes reforms to the property tax. It also means making a scene if need be to get Albany and Washington to support projects and programs that merit state and federal support, particularly funding for transportation projects that serve regional needs.

The mayor touts the 311 complaint line as a way to get information and report problems. Call 311 and express your outrage at City Hall's preliminary budget

proposal.

Tell the mayor you expect the executive budget he releases this spring to fully restore these cuts to senior, youth and cultural programs as well as our libraries and our zoo.

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