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The Public Ought to Know: Budget hearings deal with projects, services

By Corey Bearak

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Corey Bearak

As you read this, the City Council concludes its first day of hearings on the mayor's preliminary budget for the fiscal year 2006 and fiscal year 2005 Preliminary Mayor's Management Report, which includes agency oversight.

Last week's commentary discussed hearings today through March 10. This week takes a look at how council members might use remaining sessions to question city commissioners on how the mayor's preliminary budget impacts services and projects. Council members will also review the management report agency operations over the preceding months.

Please use the information that follows to advocate your concerns to your council member or the chairpersons or members of the relevant council committee(s). Everyone should share as a goal the shaping the best city budget when time comes to pass it this spring.

At 10 a.m. Friday, March 11, the Fire and Criminal Justice Services Committee looks at the office of the mayor's criminal justice coordinator to discuss the operation of indigent defense services - other than the Legal Aid Society, which gets its own 30 minutes immediately following. When I served as counsel/chief of staff to the chairman of the Council's Public Safety Committee (whose portfolio also included the agencies now under Fire and Criminal Justice Services), the Giuliani administration aggressively

sought to defund Legal Aid's criminal division and shift its case load to court appointed ("18b") lawyers and other providers. Many attorneys in these other public defender offices once worked for Legal Aid. The current model ill serves justice and the committee should explore a shift to using Legal Aid except in conflict situations involving multiple indigent defendants.

Next, the committee can explore the impact of firehouse closings, staffing shifts and Emergency Medical Service paramedic staffing with the Fire Department. The Probation and Correction Departments sessions offer opportunities to consider merging these agencies, something I advocated more than a decade ago. More importantly, it can weigh the ability to shift to greater reliance alternative to incarceration programs that save taxpayers jail costs and reduce repeat offenders.

Also that morning, the Committee on Environmental Protection, chaired by Councilman Jim Gennaro, can grill the Department of Environmental Protection on rising water and sewer rates and its leak detection program (recall the water main break that afflicted Astoria residents last month).

Councilman Tony Avella might ask why the DEP changed long-standing plans on a project I originally negotiated to alleviate flooding in Bayside Hills and near Cardozo High School by routing storm water through Oakland Ravine, which the agency now refuses to restore. The agency saved millions using that route.

The following Monday, The General Welfare Committee spends two hours each with the Human Resources Administration and the Administration for Children's Services (joint with the Women's Issues Committee). The Human Rights Commission and the Department of Homeless Services follows.

Also Monday, the big-named Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations looks at the Department of Cultural Affairs and then the three library systems, including the Queens Borough Public Library. Queens Council members might explore why the Queens County Farm Museum lacks Cultural Institution Group status when it attracts more visitors than many other museums with that status. Council members ought to embarrass City Hall in questions about how cuts to libraries now hurt kids and seniors this summer.

Tuesday, the Education Committee spars with the Department of Education over where the money really goes in face of state Comptroller Alan Hevesi's audit, school construction and maintenance.

Three committees convene Wednesday, March 16. The Parks and Recreation Committee oversees the department that shares its name. The Land Use Committee, chaired by Queens Councilwoman Melinda Katz, reviews the Landmarks Preservation Commission, the Department of Information, Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT, jointly with the Technology in Government Committee) and the city Planning Department. With DoITT, the committees can explore savings by shifting to open source computer software. The Consumer Affairs Committee looks at its namesake agency and the Business Integrity Commission.

On Friday, March 18, the Transportation Committee, chaired by Queens Councilman John Liu, convenes sessions with the MTA/NYC Transit, the Transportation Department and the Taxi and Limousine Commission. Look for questions on the private bus takeovers, token booth closings, and transportation projects. Also, that morning the Higher Education Committee meets with the City University of New York.

On Monday, March 21, the hearings conclude when the Public Safety Committee, chaired by Queens Councilman Peter Vallone, Jr., questions the Police Department followed by the Office of Emergency Management, the five district attorneys and special narcotics prosecutor, the Department of Juvenile Justice (joint with the Juvenile Justice Subcommittee) and the Civilian Complaint Review Board.

Review the Council's Web site - <http://www.nyccouncil.info> - for possible schedule changes.

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