Council Agenda Could Spark Battles With Mayor

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NEW YORK — Earlier this year, restaurant owners gathered before the City Council to lament ever-increasing fines levied against their businesses under the letter-grading system. After hearing the testimony, members of the Council vowed to do something about it.

Speaker Christine Quinn said recently that the Council would, indeed, do something about it — by working to pass legislation this fall that would reform the system of issuing letter grades to restaurants.

It is one of many policy priorities of the Council that could spark conflict with Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration in the months ahead. This year will also mark the last legislative

hurrah for Council members who won't be able to run for re-election in 2013.

Interviews with the legislative directors of some key Council members, and Council members themselves, highlighted some of the other possible ways that lawmakers will be contributing to potentially contentious policy discussions surrounding paid sick leave, gun violence and police reform.

But addressing restaurants owners' complaints about the letter grading system is expected to be a top priority.

"We have heard a lot of complaints from restaurateurs about skyrocketing fines," Quinn said last week. "In the first year or so of the grading system, we had something like three quarters of all restaurants getting an A. But we saw fines go up." She said it was difficult to fathom how that was possible.

She said that the legislation that the Council would introduce in the next month or two would help create a system that is "clear," "understandable" and "focused on public health, not revenue generation." She emphasized that the Council would not be "trying to undo letter grading."

A major policy innovation of the Bloomberg administration, the letter grading system — where the Health Department gives an A, B or C according to how restaurants score during inspections — went into effect in July 2010.

PAID SICK LEAVE

The Council spent the better part of the year bucking Bloomberg by passing laws that he opposed and then overriding his vetoes. The mayor even sued the Council when it overrode his vetoes of prevailing and living wage bills.

Another potential conflict with the Bloomberg administration could arise if the Council were to pass a bill requiring some employers to give their workers paid sick leave.

Quinn first shelved the bill in 2010, arguing that it would destroy small business; when it was reintroduced into the debate earlier this year, she again referred to the flagging economy in her refusal to bring it to a vote.

But paid sick leave (Intro 97-A) is a priority of Councilwoman Gale Brewer, who previously told the Gazette that the full Council was "going to get a bill." It has a veto-proof majority, but some changes to the measure are expected in order to get Quinn to sign off on it.

GUN VIOLENCE

After a summer of high-profile shootings, including outside the Empire State Building, gun violence continues to be a subject of interest for the Council.

This past week, a resolution was introduced into the Council in support of state legislation that would strengthen gun laws, including creating a 10-day waiting period for firearm purchases; the creation of universal background checks; regulation of ammunition sellers; and more.

The Council's own Task Force to Combat Gun Violence, co-chaired by Councilman Jumaane Williams, also is continuing to work on assessing programs to target neighborhoods where shootings are prevalent.

"We are hopeful and excited to be talking about some developments soon," said Williams' spokesman, Stefan Ringel.

The Council earmarked $4.8 million for anti-gun violence initiatives in its discretionary budget earlier this year. Some of that money has been directed toward setting up programs modeled

after the CeaseFire model that has been nationally recognized for reducing shootings in other cities. The model calls for approaching gun violence as a public health threat .

POLICE REFORM

Another potential source of discord between the Council and the Bloomberg administration could center around efforts to pass legislation that would create new oversight and regulation of the New York Police Department.

Introduced in response to police monitoring of Muslims and the tactic of street stops that critics say unfairly targets Latinos and blacks, the package of legislation that supporters refer to as the Community Safety Act
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The package includes a measure that would prohibit "bias-based profiling by law enforcement" (Intro. 800); another would require police to "provide notice and obtain proof of consent to search individuals" (Intro. 799); and a third would establish an inspector general independent of the NYPD with the authority to review police policies and make recommendations (Intro. 881).

Councilwoman Rosie Mendez said that Council members met with Commissioner Ray Kelly over the summer to voice their concerns about stop-and-frisk and other policing practices.

"We're not in agreement," she said of the meeting with Kelly, in a phone message.

The NYPD has stridently opposed calls to increase regulation or oversight of the department, arguing that plenty of safeguards currently exist.

Supporters of the Community Safety Act plan to hold a rally in front of City Hall on Sept. 27.

THE BUDGET

Last week, the Bloomberg administration said the city's agencies would need to save $2 billion over the next 18 months. The budget office had been counting on hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue from the sale of 2,000 new outer-borough taxi medallions, but the plan got held up in court.

Council members and their staff said that dealing with the budget gap would be an ongoing issue for the next several months.

Councilman James Vacca, the chair of the transportation committee, said it was unlikely that the Council could get involved in the medallion sale legislatively.

However, he said that if the mayor loses the court case, "We may have to involve the state, and go back to the drawing board."

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Photograph by William Alatriste, of the City Council