

Term Limits Extension Gets Final Signature

by Courtney Gross

Monday, November 03, 2008 03:29 PM

Scores of New York City residents filed into the mayor's side of City Hall -- a rare space for such a public spectacle -- for the city's final hearing on [term limits](#) Monday morning.

Despite the relentless opposition and at times piercing criticism, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, as expected, signed a term-limits extension into [law](#) just before 2 p.m., effectively allowing dozens of term-limited officials, including himself, to seek another four years in office.

"I feel like this time the public should have a choice," the mayor said, arguing that allowing officials to seek another term would boost democracy and broaden ballot choices. "I am going to sign the bill and the public will have a choice."

Monday's bill signing finalizes the 29 to 22 [vote by the City Council](#) last month approving the term-limits extension.

The legislation, which takes effect immediately, turns next year's citywide election on its head, sparking an immediate revision of the city's campaign finance regulations. Dozens of candidates, many of whom thought they would have competitive races for open seats, must now [weigh](#) whether they want to [challenge](#) eight-year incumbents.

Contribution limits are set depending upon the office being sought. Because, potentially, dozens of candidates could decide to seek re-election instead of higher office, the city's [Campaign Finance Board](#) issued an advisory opinion Monday on how to address the different types of expenditures and contributions without harshly penalizing one candidate or another.

The [advisory opinion](#) would allow candidates to freeze their current accounts if they had been seeking higher office, saving the "war chest" for another race. Or, the board's chairman the Rev. Joseph P. Parkes said, if he or she wants to continue using the funds, he or she could return contributions that exceed the spending limits.

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"In the final analysis, what we have attempted to do is to provide guidance to affected candidates in a timely way, based on these objectives: to make it practical for candidates to join the campaign finance program, to treat both incumbents and potential challengers fairly, and to encourage competitive races for all offices covered by the program," said the chairman in a prepared statement.

What's Next

The term limits battle is far from over, though. Immediately after the mayor signed the bill, council members Letitia James and Bill de Blasio, along with mayoral candidates Rep. Anthony Weiner and Comptroller William Thompson Jr., vowed to fight the action in court. Several lawsuits have already been filed.

"If democracy was on life support after the City Council hearing, it was killed today," said Thompson.

Monday's [public hearing](#) was a condensed rerun of about 20 hours of testimony in front of the City Council last month. Some of the same characters appeared and testimony was still divided -- about half of the 137 speakers supported the mayor's bill, an administration spokesman said.

Members of the public entered the Blue Room -- the mayor's press briefing area -- and spilled over into the building's vast rotunda starting around 9 a.m. One at a time, they stood in front of a gargantuan portrait of Alexander Hamilton, chiming in about democracy and oligarchy, tyranny and justice.

Groups were led into the small and packed room five at a time. Because of the tight quarters (the Blue Room is traditionally where bill signings are held), speakers could not stay inside to hear other testimony. That was also a point of criticism.

"This is the least public public hearing I've ever been to," said Henry Stern, a former parks commissioner.

Sitting behind a freshly polished wooden table, the mayor, accompanied by a half dozen of his

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male City Council colleagues, listened to four and half hours of testimony on term limits. Rarely did Bloomberg crack a smile, but instead appeared stone-faced and impenetrable.

That did not discourage some speakers from emotional outbursts. One called the mayor "public enemy number one" and others said the legislation was merely a power grab.

"You've behaved in ways that would make Boss Tweed blush with embarrassment," sad Gene Russianoff of the [New York Public Interest Research Group](#) .

Many of the opponents said extending term limits legislatively undermines the will of the people who twice voted in the 1990s to keep term limits at two. They called for a public referendum.

A statement released by the administration after the hearing argued there would be no time for a special election, because it would need to be certified by the [U.S. Department of Justice](#) . They also said it would be tied up in court as candidates were seeking petitions to run for office in 2009, creating uncertainty and confusion.

Members of police, fire and public employees unions came out in force to support the mayor, arguing his expertise is needed during the city's uncertain fiscal future.

"I don't see this as a self-serving bill," said Gary La Barbera, president of the [New York City Central Labor Council](#) . "I believe we are in unprecedented economic times."

While this is far from the end of the term limits debate, Monday's hearing came with a sense of finality for the bill's supporters, maybe even for the mayor.

"Everyone, thank you for your patience," the mayor said after signing the bill and while exiting the room. "And make sure you vote tomorrow."

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