by Gotham Gazette Staff
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New York City Council Stated Meeting Report

Every two weeks the New York City Council meets for its Stated Meeting to introduce and pass legislation. As a regular feature, Searchlight covers these meetings and posts a summary of the bills passed.

STATED MEETING - November 10, 2004

Quote of the Day:
"Last year, when the mayor announced that he wanted to go into the twelve most dangerous schools and help turn those schools around... when the statistics came out months later... it turned out that only one of those twelve was actually among the most dangerous." - City Council Speaker Gifford Miller commenting on the need to better track school crime and violence.

Meeting Summary:
On November 10, the New York City Council passed a package of legislation that it says will improve safety in New York City schools. In recent months, there have been conflicting reports about the severity of school crime.

In the fall of 2003, the United Federation of Teachers reported that the number of criminal incidents against teachers and principals had risen 39 percent and that more than 1,800 students had received transfers to different schools because of concerns over safety. However, Schools Chancellor Joel Klein said a few months later that "there is no indication that there has been any significant increase in incidents."

To try to address the issue, the council passed a bill (Intro 266-A) that requires the Department of Education to make more information about school crimes available to the public. The legislation requires a specific listing of each serious, minor, and criminal instance and requires the city make the data available online, at individual schools, and in the annual reports on each school.

"I have a daughter in the fifth grade and when I looked for middle schools, I could not find crime

statistics on the Web," said Councilmember Peter Vallone, Jr. who drafted the bill. "I could find what they had for lunch, but not crime statistics."

The second bill in the package (Intro 322-A) requires the city to give the council a quarterly report on the number of school safety agents assigned to each school.

The third bill (Intro 150-A) requires that by the end of 2006, every school in the city specify if they have security cameras installed, and if not, to explain why they believe they are not needed. Of the 1,300 schools in New York City, only 155 currently have security cameras. The council also allocated $120 million in the 5-year capital budget for new security cameras, which cost approximately $75,000 per school to install.

Some council members argued that money should be spent on upgrading schools, creating smaller classes, and funding other programs rather than buying security cameras.

"Don't put a police officer next to each child," said Councilmember Charles Barron. "Put a computer and textbook next to each child."

The council passed all three bills. (Councilmember Dennis Gallagher voted against the school safety agent reports and Councilmember Charles Barron voted against the security cameras.)

The City Council also gave its approval to a new Marriott Hotel on 125th Street and Park Avenue in Harlem, the first hotel to be built in the area since 1966.

The building - known as Harlem Park - will feature two floors of retail space, five floors of commercial space, 11 floors of residential space, and 12 floors of hotel rooms. The initial plan called for the tower to be 550 feet tall, but after negotiations with the local community board and council members it was reduced by about 100 feet. Proponents say the project will create about 900 jobs.

Harlem Councilmember Bill Perkins opposes the project, arguing that it will dwarf every other building in Harlem and that the residential apartments will sell for $600 per square foot and will not be affordable to locals.

"If it is bad for my district, El Barrio, Harlem, or the Upper West Side... then it is bad for the city," said Perkins.

The Marriott hotel plan passed by a vote of 39 to 7 with one abstention. (Bill Perkins, Letitia James, Robert Jackson, Al Vann, Hiram Monserrate, Eric Dilan, and Charles Barron voted "no;" James Sanders abstained.)

The next Stated Meeting is scheduled for November 23, 2004.

For an archive of past meetings and council votes, visit Gotham Gazette's Searchlight .