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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 - June 28, 2004

Quote of the Day:

"Mayor Bloomberg is clearly not committed to the rights and needs of domestic partners and the gay, lesbian, and transgender community. He feels comfortable with a hypocritical veto... but the council will protect those rights and make sure that the laws of the city treat all people, all families, and all workers the same." - Councilmember Christine Quinn on the mayor's veto of the Equal Benefits Bill.

Meeting Summary:

In an effort to pass as much legislation as possible before their summer break, the New York City Council considered a dozen measures on June 28th, including overriding a veto by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, passing a series of new laws, and approving a zoning plan that will transform downtown Brooklyn.

"We accomplished more today than the State Legislature did all year," quipped Councilmember Lew Fidler.

The major item of the day was an override the mayor's veto of the Equal Benefits Bill ([Intro 137-B](#)), legislation that requires companies that contract with New York City to provide benefits to the domestic partners of their employees.

Municipal employees were given domestic partner benefits beginning in 1998, but currently companies or organizations that have contracts to provide services for New York are not required to abide by the same rules.

The legislation applies to religious organizations and institutions, some of which oppose gay and lesbian relationships. Groups like the Salvation Army and the New York Archdiocese opposed the bill and said they may stop providing benefits to employees altogether or stop providing services.

Mayor Bloomberg vetoed the bill because he said that the city should not use the contracting process to promote social policies, and a handful of City Council members agreed.

"It is ironic that some people who usually fight to keep God out of government, today have no problem using government to regulate God," said Peter Vallone, Jr. who voted with the mayor.

But supporters argued that the legislation provides an exception for religious groups that allows them to give benefits - not by virtue of domestic partnership - but because family members live in the same household.

The council needed "yes" votes from two-thirds of the 51 members to override the mayor's veto; 41 members voted for the bill, 4 voted against it, and 3 abstained. (Simcha Felder, Dennis Gallagher, James Oddo, and Peter Vallone, Jr. cast "No" votes. Michael Nelson, Allan Jennings and Joseph Addabbo Jr. abstained.)

The council also passed a bill ([Intro 142](#)) making it illegal for police officers to use racial or ethnic profiling to fight crime. This is already a standard part of police department procedures, but the measure makes it an official city law. Both the mayor and Police Commissioner Ray Kelly support the legislation.

"This helps us to work together to fight crime, not our citizens," said Councilmember Phil Reed.

Another bill, the Dignity for All Schools Act ([Intro 188-A](#)), will require the Department of Education establish clear guidelines that prohibit harassment and bullying in schools. While council members acknowledged that they cannot legislate student behavior, they insist that

by Gotham Gazette Staff
Monday, June 28, 2004 12:00 AM

school officials can do more to prevent and report harassment.

"For too many going to school means going through a gauntlet of taunting and teasing, pushing and pulling," said Councilmember Alan Gerson. "The greatest shame in all of this is the complicity of government and bureaucratic officials who accept it as part of growing up."

The City Council also approved a rezoning of downtown Brooklyn that will transform the area into a new corporate, retail, and residential district. The council said the action would eventually build 4.5 million square feet of office space and 1,000 new apartments. The project is expected to create 18,500 new office jobs and 8,000 construction jobs.

The rezoning only applies to MetroTech, not the planned Brooklyn Nets basketball stadium, but some area residents still oppose the plan.

One point of contention relates to properties on Duffield Street, where some of the buildings may have been used in the underground railroad, the network of people who helped black slaves escape from the South. The council agreed to hold hearings on the historic significance of the area in July or August and will make recommendations to the city's landmark committee for preserving the area if needed.

The Brooklyn rezoning passed by a vote for 47 to 0, with one abstention from Brooklyn Councilmember Charles Barron, who said that he could not support the measure until the issue of the historic significance of the area was resolved.

The council also passed a bill ([Intro 223-A](#)) that would help crack down on people who pose as immigration lawyers and prey on undocumented residents and a measure ([Intro 261-A](#)) giving New York City students voter registration cards when they graduate. Other legislation extended a moratorium on fines for store awnings ([Intro 272-A](#)), established new regulations for sidewalk news stands ([Intro 363-A](#)), and updated fire codes ([Intro 248](#)).

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Finally, the City Council passed a series of resolutions - that do not carry any legal action - but represent the official view of the legislative body.

Resolution 71-A calls on the state to legalize the use of marijuana for medical purposes.

Resolution 152-A rejects Mayor Bloomberg's education policy of holding back third graders who do not pass a standardized test.

Resolution 203-A opposes the federal government's plan to cut Section 8 vouchers for low income New Yorkers.

Resolution 324 supports home health aides who are seeking a raise.

And [Resolution 389-A](#) calls upon the mayor and other city officials to protect First Amendment rights of protestors at the Republican National Convention in August.

The next Stated Meeting is scheduled for July 21, 2004.

For an archive of past meetings and council votes, visit Gotham Gazette's [Searchlight](#) .