by Gotham Gazette Staff
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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.

Meeting Summary:
Education Capital Budget

When Mayor Michael Bloomberg presented his city budget at the end of January , the New York City Council's biggest criticism was a proposed $1.3 billion cut to the school construction budget over the next five years.

The loss of funds, the City Council warned, meant new classrooms would not be built, broken toilets would not be fixed, and outdated fire alarm systems would not be upgraded. Council Speaker Gifford Miller even threatened to block a budget agreement between the two sides if the money was cut.

Often such stark differences between the mayor and council are not resolved until the final hours before the budget is due on July 1. But last week, the mayor eliminated further debate on the issue when he agreed to double the school construction budget in the next fiscal year to a total of $2.6 billion.

Mayor Bloomberg, who faces reelection in November, will now not have to face months of criticism that he is shortchanging schools. And when the City Council met to approve the budget change on March 23, members took credit for "restoring" the money.

"We have done an outstanding job in making sure we defend the education of our children," said Bronx Councilmember Joel Rivera, who then encouraged his collegues to give themselves a round of applause.

However, the total amount of money to be spent on school construction over the five-year period - $13 billion - did not change; the mayor and the council's action simply shifts $1.3 billion that would have been spent in coming years into the present year. And the city is still counting on $6.5 billion of that $13 billion to come from the governor and State Legislature in Albany, which so far has shown little indication that it will deliver the increase in school funding.

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Bay Ridge Rezoning

In addition to the budget modification, the City Council approved a major rezoning (L.U. 417 -418 and Res 907-908) for Bay Ridge, Brooklyn , which will limit the height and size of the homes that can be built in the neighborhood.

For years, Bay Ridge residents have complained that developers purchase historic single-family homes, tear them down, and then build tall multi-unit apartment buildings in their place. The rezoning will limit the density of the housing in the area and preserve 101 blocks for one- or two-family houses.

“Residents will be able to enjoy their homes without the fear of a monstrosity coming in down the street,” said Bay Ridge Councilmember Vincent Gentile. “This is probably the biggest thing to happen to the area in a quarter century.”

Cell Phone Towers

The council also passed a bill (Intro 149-A) that requires the city to maintain a list of where cellular phone antennae are erected. Councilmember Peter Vallone, Jr., who authored the bill, is concerned about the possible health effects of the towers and sees the measure as a first step in finding out more about the issue. (Read a related story about cell phone towers).

ParkNet and CityStat

In addition, the council passed a bill (Intro 462-A) that requires the city to post signs at city beaches to alert visitors about cleanliness and the results recent inspections. The measure also requires the Parks Department to post all inspection reports of playgrounds, parks, and open space on its Web site . The Parks Department already gathers such information for internal use , but it is not easily available to the public.

The bill’s author, Councilmember Eric Gioia, now wants to expand the idea and create a citywide online database, called CityStat, to measure how each agency is performing. Baltimore has already implemented such a system and claims it has saved the city $43 million over three

years. (Read a related article).

“If this works, it will be replicated in cities across the country,” said Gioia.

All of the measures passed the council unanimously, by a vote of 49 to 0. The next Stated Meeting is scheduled for April 12, 2005.

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