City Council Stated Meeting - April 20, 2005

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.

Quote of the Day:

"I have a confession to make: I am a sinner. Throughout my life I have committed many sins. But the sins I am accused of today, I did not commit. I am innocent." â€“ City Councilmember Allan Jennings responding to charges that he mistreated female staff members.

Meeting Summary:

Although most reporters and even many New York City Council members had already left City Hall when the bills finally came up for a vote, the City Council considered more than just the behavior of its own members at its recent meeting.

Nearly two hours after the meeting began, the council approved five measures aimed at reducing pollution from buses, trucks, and other city vehicles.

Intro 414-A requires that the city purchase cleaner burning vehicles in the future.

Intro 415-A requires that city's diesel fueled vehicles now use "ultra-low sulfur" emission fuel.

Intro 416-A places more stringent pollution requirements on trash- and recycling-trucks used by the Department of Sanitation.

Intro 417-A reduces emissions on "sight-seeing" buses used for tourism tours.

And Intro 428-A places new pollution requirements on vehicles that transport children to and from school.

The council also passed two bills (Intro 328-A and 329-B) that will reduce the city's use of pesticides and require that residents receive information when certain chemicals are used in an area near a home or apartment.

“This is the most important environmental legislation that this council ever done,” said Councilmember James Gennarro.

But most of the meeting was dedicated to the discussion of the penalties filed against Queens City Councilmember Allan Jennings, who for the last year has faced allegations of sexual misconduct and mistreatment of female staff members.

After a nine-month internal investigation, the council’s eight-member Standards and Ethics Committee found Jennings guilty of improperly firing one employee on his staff and creating a hostile work environment. Five women charged Jennings touched them inappropriately, subjected them to racist remarks, and intimidated them.

Last week, the committee recommended that Jennings be allowed to stay in office, but suggested the most stringent penalties ever imposed on a member of the council. The full council was only asked to vote on the penalties, not to consider the validity of the charges.

By a vote of 43 to 2, with 4 abstentions, the council voted that Jennings must:
- Pay a $5,000 fine
- Undergo court-certified anger management and gender, racial and harassment sensitivity training
- Receive a public censure
- And be stripped of all of his committee assignments and stipends.

Jennings spoke a length in his own defense, arguing that the allegations were politically and racially motivated and unsubstantiated. He blasted the council’s process as a series of “secret hearings” where he was denied the right to cross-examine certain witnesses.

“The sins I am accused of today, I did not commit,” said Jennings. “I am innocent.”

Jennings ended his remarks by reading a Bible verse then paraphrasing the words of Jesus Christ; “I forgive you all, for you know not what you do.”

The only other council member to vote “no” on the penalty was Brooklyn Councilmember Charles Barron, who said he could not judge whether the charges were true or false because the hearings were closed to the public and other council members.

“You may get Jennings today, but they may come for you tomorrow,” said Barron.

Many council members said they were embarrassed by the events. Councilmember Margarita Lopez said the council should have acted more quickly to address the complaints. Other council members â€“ like John Liu and Dominic Recchia - thought the penalties should have been more stringent.

“It’s a shame that he isn’t being expelled!” said Recchia.

Council members Eric Dilan, Oliver Koppell, Kendall Stewert, and Hiram Monserrate abstained from the vote.

Jennings’ lawyer said he plans to appeal the ruling to the State Supreme Court.

The next Stated Meeting is scheduled for May 11, 2005.

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