

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

QUOTE OF THE DAY:

"It's been 80 years since the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, I wouldn't think people are willing to re-live it." â€“ Councilmember David Yassky on a bill to increase fines for employers who lock workers inside a building.

MEETING SUMMARY:

GREEN BUILDINGS

The New York City Council passed a bill ([Intro 324-A](#)) mandating more stringent environmental standards for the construction and rehabilitation of municipal buildings, including schools, hospitals and city offices.

These ["green buildings"](#) aim to save energy, produce less pollution, and conserve natural resources. They also restrict the use of certain types of harmful building materials, which some say contribute to respiratory disease.

"Our young people who have asthma will not be exposed to the same sorts of toxic substances in our schools," said City Council Speaker Gifford Miller.

In addition to city-owned buildings, the requirements also apply to private development projects that receive more than \$10 million in city funding. The legislation would take effect in January 2007 and will have an impact on an estimated \$12 billion in new construction.

Supporters also hope that the regulations will save the city money on its future energy bills and encourage new areas of the construction industry, which focus on building more environmentally friendly structures.

The measure passed unanimously.

CIVIL RIGHTS PROTECTION

The council approved a measure ([Intro 22-A](#)) aimed at strengthening the city's existing human rights law.

Currently, city residents are protected against discrimination as a result of "the actual or perceived age, race, creed, color, national origin, gender, disability, marital status, sexual orientation or alienage or citizenship status of any person."

Intro 22-A adds "partnership status" to the list of protected classes, further emphasizing the city's position on domestic partnership for both gay and heterosexual unmarried couples.

The measure also guarantees that the city's standards are worded differently from state or federal law. This is meant to prevent judges from applying weaker federal and state laws to city human rights cases.

"The bottom line is we are in an environment where... human and civil rights are being restricted more and more with each passing day," said Brooklyn Councilmember Bill DeBlasio. "Localities have to stand up for their own visions for what makes a community and how we protect the rights of individuals."

The measure passed by a vote of 42 to 3, with one abstention. The three Republican council members - Andrew Lanza, Dennis Gallagher, and James Oddo - voted "no." Peter Vallone, Jr. abstained from the vote. (For more on the bill, see ["Human Rights Law: Will It Become An Issue In The Mayoral Campaign?"](#) by Andy Humm, on the civil rights topic page.)

WORKER PROTECTION

Another council bill ([Intro 629-A](#)) increases fines for stores or businesses that lock their employees, in particular janitors or those stocking shelves, inside the workplace.

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Last year, the Brooklyn community group Fifth Avenue Committee identified more than three-dozen supermarkets in the city where workers were being locked in at night. Business owners said they did it for security reasons, but elected officials pointed to the safety hazards.

"People were being locked in from the outside," said Councilmember David Yassky. "God forbid there was a fire or someone had a heart attack because they wouldn't be able to get out."

Violators can be fined \$5,000 for a first offense and up to \$20,000 for subsequent incidents. The bill passed unanimously.

EMPIRE ZONE IN LOWER MANHATTAN

The most vigorous debate of the day was on a measure ([Intro 693-A](#)) to support the creation of an Empire Zone in Chinatown and Lower Manhattan.

Empire Zones are designed to target areas of poverty and unemployment with tax incentives. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the city applied for the designation to help Lower Manhattan's economy. However, Governor George Pataki chose to award the Empire Zone to Renssalaer County, the home of upstate Republican State Senate leader Joseph Bruno instead.

Now Lower Manhattan has another chance for the assistance, and Councilmember Allan Gerson, who represents the area, says it is still desperately needed.

However, Lower East Side Councilmember Margarita Lopez argued the council should have done more to require that one parcel of land within the Empire Zone, which has been empty for 30 years, is used for affordable housing.

"We talk about affordable housing in this campaign year," said Lopez, "but we don't act."

Gerson said that because Empire Zones are under state control, the City Council did not have

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the ability to require apartments be built there at this time.

"I promise to work tirelessly to make sure that it is used for affordable housing," said Gerson.

The measure passed by a vote of 42 to 2, with one abstention. Margarita Lopez and Tony Avella voted "no." Charles Barron abstained because he said he wasn't sure whom to believe.

Council members Diana Reyna, Allan Jennings, Oliver Koppel, Miguel Martinez, and Phil Reed were absent.

The next Stated Meeting is scheduled for September 28, 2005.

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