

by Gail Robinson
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Every two weeks the New York City Council meets for its Stated Meeting both to introduce and pass legislation. As a regular feature, Gotham Gazette covers these meetings.

The City Council took a small step to ease the cost of housing for low-income New Yorkers.

The council unanimously expanded an existing law that reduces property taxes exemption for low-income senior citizens and disabled New Yorkers who own their homes. Currently, seniors and disabled people must have incomes must have incomes of less that\$32,400 to be exempt from paying part of their property tax. Council now has raised that limit to \$34,400 for this year and will gradually increase that to \$37,400 in 2009. To receive the maximum benefit, the homeowners have to have income of \$24,000 or less now. That will go up to \$29,000 in 2009.

The changes, said Councilmember Maria del Carmen Arroyo of the Bronx, chair of the committee would help people who may not be below the poverty level. (See related story on how that level is defined, [The Poverty Commission: Measuring Up?](#)) But she said, those who could benefit “still suffer day in and day out, making difficult decisions” on how to spend their limited incomes, sometimes having to choose between food and medicine.

Arroyo estimated that currently only about 40,000 of the possibly 60,000 New Yorkers eligible for the exemption apply for it. “We have to do a better job of informing seniors and disabled New Yorkers,” Council Speaker Christine Quinn said.

While praising the property tax exemption for low-income property Councilmember Gale Brewer urged her fellow members to try to provide some relief for elderly or disabled renters, who rent includes payments for their landlords’ property tax.

The council vote on the measures, Intro 445-A, was 47 to 0

AFFORDABLE HOUSING – FUURE MATTERS

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There was also discussion of other, possibly more controversial, matters relating to affordable housing.

Saving Stuyvesant Town?

Councilmember Rosie Mendez introduced a bill, which if passed, would require that, when any large scale development is put up for auction, the city housing department conduct a study of what impact that sale would have on housing in the city. The measure is clearly aimed at the [impending sale of Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village](#), onetime [middle-income housing developments](#) on Manhattan's West Side. "It is good public policy that would allow the city of New York to find out what is happening with our housing situation," Mendez said.

The possible loss of so many rent regulated apartments is "too important for the city to sit back and simply watch it happen," Councilmember Daniel Garodnik, who lives in the development said,

But some question whether, even if is approved, any such law could take effect in time to affect that sale.

Tax Breaks for Developers?

Shortly before the meeting, the council received a report from the Bloomberg administration proposing [changes in the 421-A program](#) that gives a tax break to developers. Currently most builders who construct housing in the city get a tax break. But in a few sections of Manhattan and Brooklyn, they must build affordable housing, usually along with their other project, to earn their exemption from some tax increases. Now, the administration is recommending that those areas be expanded to include such desirable sections of the city as Lower Manhattan, parts of Harlem, Brooklyn Heights and other places on the Brooklyn and Queens waterfront. The administration would also set other new limits on the tax break.

Many of the proposed changes are aimed at encouraging developers to build more affordable

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housing. Some in the real estate industry have claimed such rules could hamper development in the city, while some housing advocates have criticized the administration for not going far enough.

The changes must be approved by the council.

At a press conference, Quinn did not take a position on the recommendations other than to say 421-A should be “as sharp and focused as possible.” She said council had just received the report on 421-A from the city and would be reviewing the recommendations. “Some changes are necessary, absolutely,” she said.

HUDSON YARDS

In other action, the council approved a package relating to the [Hudson Yards project](#) on Manhattan’s West Side. The measures extended the project’s boundary westward, and would allow the area – including the proposed site of the rejected Jets football stadium – to be part of the planning process. “This moves us ever closer to having the rail yards come before us in the land use process,” Quinn said. Council must approve land use changes and, during the fight over the stadium, Bloomberg had sought to keep the project out of the land use process.

The measure, resolution 547, which Quinn defined as consisting of “technical actions,” elicited little debate or controversy, indicating how things had changed since the furor over the stadium ended with its being [rejected by a state panel](#). “What a difference 18 months makes,” said Councilmember David Weprin, chair of the Finance Committee.

The resolution passed by a vote of 43 to zero, with Councilmembers Charles Barron, Lew Fidler, Letitia James and Darlene Mealy, all of Brooklyn, abstaining. James, an outspoken opponent of the huge [Atlantic Yards](#) project in her district, said she was withholding her vote. Alluding to the fact that that basketball arena and housing development will not come before council, James said, “any yards in Manhattan and Brooklyn should be treated the same. In the borough of Brooklyn, we are treated differently.”

COMPOSTING

In a follow-up to its approval earlier this year of a [solid waste plan](#) for the city, the council

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approved a bill to encourage and
[improve composting of yard waste](#)

. Sanitation committee chair Michael McMahon of Staten Island said the new law will reduce the amount of garbage generated in the city and so reduce truck traffic. It requires that homeowners separate yard waste, putting it in garbage bins or paper bags, Currently many people use plastic bags for grass clippings and the like, requiring that the waste be removed from the bags before it can be used for compost. In addition, the clippings tend to become smelly when they are tied up in plastic. Under the new law, private landscaping companies will have to bring their waste to a composting site if possible.

The vote on Intro 431-A was 47 to 0.

"A green city is a clean city and when you combine a clean city with a safe city you have a happy city," McMahon said.

Well maybe we need one more thing " a World Series championship. Many council members took advantage of the meeting just before the start of the League Championship Series to urge the Mets on to victory. Eventually even lifelong Yankees fan Councilmember Joel Rivera said, "Let's go Mets."

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