

Meeting Amid Scandal

by Courtney Gross

Monday, April 21, 2008 12:00 AM

The indictment of two City Council staffers completely overshadowed an attempt to get back to business at City Hall last week, but Council Speaker Christine Quinn tried to move on anyway.

At its stated meeting Wednesday, the City Council approved a bill providing greater protection to taxi and livery drivers during the dispute process at the Taxi and Limousine Commission. It also approved a resolution calling for the immediate bailout of the city's Off-Track Betting Corp.

Getting Back to Business

While Quinn continued to ward off questions on the ongoing phantom organization investigation, another press conference blocks from City Hall highlighted alleged corruption in the allocation of the council's discretionary funds.

Two staffers, including the former chief of staff to Councilmember Kendall Stewart, were [indicted](#) on federal charges of mail fraud and money laundering for redirecting funds from an educational nonprofit for their own personal use. The funds originally came from the council's discretionary funding. (Check out our previous coverage of the council's discretionary funding [here](#) and the scandal [here](#)).

That announcement occurred while the speaker gave a routine press conference prior to the body's stated meeting. Needless to say, not a question was asked regarding the legislation under consideration by the council.

A "Victory" For Cabbies

Though little attention was paid to the bill, the council approved legislation Wednesday that gives greater protection to taxi drivers who face complaints in front of the Taxi and Limousine Commission.

Currently, when a cab driver faces a complaint at the commission, only a written statement is needed from the accuser for the cabbie to be found guilty. The bill, ([Intro 256](#)) which was

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sponsored by Councilmember Miguel Martinez, would encourage the commission to provide witnesses through teleconferencing or videoconferencing. The commission, however, would not be required to produce witnesses, but show only reasonable efforts that they attempted to, according to the bill.

"It's about due process," said Martinez. "We have drivers understanding that they are not guilty until proven innocent, but rather they are innocent until proven guilty."

It was approved unanimously by a vote of 51 to 0.

Off-Track Betting Salvation

About 1,500 pink slips went out to employees of New York City's Off-Track Betting Corp. this week, according to Councilmember David Weprin -- an outspoken supporter of keeping OTB afloat.

The city's betting locations are poised to shut their doors this summer, because they are soon to become insolvent.

For months, members of the City Council and Mayor Michael Bloomberg have [blamed Albany](#) for the corporation's failure to remain profitable, arguing the state has devised funding formulas that treat the city's locations unfairly.

In response, the council approved a resolution ([Reso 1235](#)) urging the state to move quickly to save OTB before it closes all of its locations in the city by June 16. The move followed a [commitment](#) last week by Gov. David Paterson, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, who promised to work with the city to keep them open.

According to Weprin, OTB brings in \$1.1 billion of revenue annually.

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