

Council Passes Budget, Taking a Bow for Saving Teachers, Fire Companies

by Gail Robinson

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Photo by courtesy of the Office of Mayor Michael Bloomberg City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced Friday night that they had reached a deal on the 2012 budget. The council approved that deal yesterday

As expected, the New York City Council yesterday passed a \$66 billion spending plan for fiscal year 2012 that includes no teacher layoffs, keeps all fire companies open and does not raise taxes.

The council did not take its action until shortly after noon Wednesday -- some 16 hours later than originally planned. The vote, though, had essentially been a foregone conclusion since Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Mayor Michael Bloomberg [announced](#) an agreement Friday night -- almost exactly at the same time the State Senate passed same sex marriage -- that averted the laying off of 4,100 teachers and the closing of 20 fire companies, all of which Bloomberg had called for in his executive budget.

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Council member after council member came to microphone to hail the deal and praise those who had helped craft it -- most notably Christine Quinn. Quinn, a likely 2013 mayoral candidate who [gained stature](#) during the budget negotiations, clearly enjoyed the praise.

This is, Quinn said, "not a perfect budget. It would be impossible to have a perfect budget when the city and our tax revenues are still feeling the effects of the recession."

In particular Quinn, Finance Committee chair Domenic Recchia and others applauded the council for reversing what they saw as some of the worst parts of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's executive budget. "There were so many bad things that were averted in this budget," Quinn said, crediting Recchia for much of that. "What we did in this budget was identify areas where the pain was too deep." "When the mayor announced the layoff of 4,1000 teachers, that was devastating news," said Robert Jackson, chair of the education committee. "Considering what the [mayor's] plan was asking, we've come a long way." Yet the deal reached was not without controversy -- and, for some, pain. It will mean some service cuts and an estimated 1,000 city workers will lose their jobs.

Budget Dance Redux

To reverse some of the proposed cuts, the budget, [according to the mayor's office](#), takes advantage of \$3.6 billion in funds left over from this fiscal year and \$700 million from the [Retiree Health Benefit Trust](#).

Beyond the teachers, the deal restores all or part of a number of programs, many familiar to those who have watched the budget negotiations between the executive and legislative branches in years past.

Most prominently it keeps open the 20 fire companies the administration had [sought to shut](#). This marked the seventh time Bloomberg tried to close fire companies -- and the sixth time he has failed to do so. (He did [close six](#) in 2003.)

Many believe the administration thinks the department is too large -- a relic of days when

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buildings were wood and lacked smoke detectors or sprinkler systems. That said, shutting fire companies is sure to provoke outrage from the surrounding community and from City Council -- as it did this year.

"We are not going to close fire houses in a process that is exclusively driven by the bottom line," Quinn said on the council floor yesterday. But, she added, if people want to have a discussion that is "open and transparent" about response times and changing neighborhood needs "we can have that discussion."

Although some workers at the Administration for Children's Services will lose their jobs and childcare vouchers [will see cuts](#), the budget restores almost \$47 million to the agency, including 4,942 childcare vouchers, six childcare centers and 105 child protective workers.

Senior services, which did not fair as badly as many other social services in the mayor's budget, got back about \$30 million of what was cut. This includes \$3 million for case management, \$1 million for meals on wheels, \$800,000 for elder abuse programs and \$14 million for senior centers and meals.

As usual, cultural organizations and libraries also recouped some of their cuts, with \$61 million put back into the budget for the city's four library systems. The council will keep all city pools open -- reversing the [planned closure of four](#) -- and adds in \$891,000 so people can swim for the full summer season.

"We did all this," Recchia said, "without raising taxes, without going further into our trust fund and most of all we didn't kick the can down the road."

The Pain Remains

Although the budget actually will be larger than the current year's -- \$66 billion from [last year's \\$63.1 billion](#)

-- it still features a number of cuts. In education, for example, the city will not replace 2,600 teachers who it expects will voluntarily leave the school system this summer, almost certainly class size to increase. While the administration has always dismissed the importance of class size, many advocates and teachers groups

[maintain](#)

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that smaller class sizes boost learning, particularly for very young and low-income students.

Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott has [warned schools](#) to expect an average budget reduction of about 2.4 percent -- exact amounts will vary from school to school. In addition to lost teaching positions, this could mean elimination of afterschool programs, tutoring help and parent coordinators in some buildings. Also [apparently eliminated](#) : a program to help teacher's buy supplies.

The budget involves some 1,000 layoffs, largely of members of [DC 37](#) , the city's largest municipal employee union. In a statement, union president Lillian Roberts assailed the cuts, saying that were it not for "billions .. squandered on 'scandal- ridden' private contracts and [Bloomberg's] failure to collect millions in taxes and fees" the firings and the accompanying service cuts -- would be unnecessary.

In casting the one dissenting vote, Councilmember Charles Barron assailed the budget for laying off as many as 1,200 city workers and for cutting aid to student at the City University.

Explaining his yes vote, Jumaane Williams said he believed the council budget "is better than what we had," but, he continued, "I don't think it's a celebratory budget." Williams also expressed concern about the cuts in scholarship money.

Some 13 people protesting the cuts were arrested Thursday night when they tried to enter the council's office at 250 Broadway. And during yesterday's vote a small group of protesters twice disrupted the meeting with chants. "No cuts, no layoffs, no compromise," they said before being ushered out.

Dee Knight of [New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts](#) said that, while his group was pleased that layoffs of teacher had been averted, the budget still cuts public sector jobs at a time when he said, the city has a \$3 billion surplus. In particular, Knight objected to cuts to libraries and the City University. "It's crazy and contemptuous," Knight said.

The Revenue Side

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Under law, the city budget must be balanced, a challenge given declining aid from Washington and Albany and rising expenses for pensions and debt service. Almost all the discussion on eliminating any budget gap centered on cutting services rather the increasing revenues.

The budget passed yesterday did up a handful of fees, such as the cost of a taxi inspection. All together, these fees would bring in an extra \$8 million. Despite that council Republicans, along with Peter Vallone, opposed some or all of these measures.

"I don't believe we are in a position where we should be raising fees on anyone," Councilmember Dan Halloran said

The Pork Roll

In approving the budget, the council also OK'd member items -- also known as pork or earmarks -- for 2012. Listed in a document called [Schedule C](#) , they fill amounts to 650 pages and total about \$50 million for nonprofit and community groups across the city.

Four members got \$1 million or more, according to an [analysis](#) by NY1, with Finance Committee chair [Domenic Recchia](#) getting to hand out \$1.6 million.

The grants include a few thousands dollars to small groups, such as the Committee to Improve Carroll Park in Brooklyn, which got \$3,000 to run a concert series for children, Animal Haven, which will get \$4,500 to teach kids about animal care, Little League teams and senior centers.

At the other end of the scale, the [Metropolitan New York Coordinating Council on Jewish Poverty](#) , which has close ties to Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, apparently topped the list of recipients with at least \$1.3 million.

In second place, the Daily News [reported was the Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Citizens Council with more than \\$600,000, even though it has been the target of criminal investigations. That -- and allegations surrounding the](#)

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[groups founder, Brooklyn Democratic Party leader Vito Lopez -- was not enough to stop the Brooklyn delegation and Councilmember Stephen Levin, Elizabeth Crowley, Domenic Recchia and Erik Martin-Dilan, from allocating money to the group.](#)

On Again Off Again Layoffs

This year marks the third year in a row that Bloomberg threatened to lay off teachers, only to retreat as the time for the ax to fall neared. Last year he [averted the firings](#) by imposing a salary freeze on teachers. Throughout the budget negotiation, he and Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott adamantly [rejected alternatives](#) to the layoffs as the [United Federation of Teachers](#), education advocates and some City Council members insisted the cuts were unnecessary.

In the end, it seems they were correct. The budget averts any layoffs through a combination of moves, including a suspension of teacher sabbaticals in the coming year, allowing teacher with no permanent assignments (those in the so-called Absent Teacher Reserve) to serve as substitutes and cuts to non-teaching programs in the Department of Education. According to the council, in essence, one third of the costs will be borne by the teachers and two thirds by the city. During the session yesterday, a number of members, including Quinn, thanked teachers union president Michael Mulgrew for his role in preventing layoffs.

As Bloomberg called for sweeping teachers cuts this year -- at one point [venturing 25 percent](#) of the teaching force would have to be slashed -- some accused him of crying wolf in an effort to get Albany to increase its aid to the city (that [didn't work](#)) and to [change](#) the last in, first out rule governing layoffs of teaching staff (that didn't work either).

Now that Bloomberg retreated once again, some have questioned whether he ever was serious.

"Of course, he was bluffing, but we knew that," said Clara Hemphill, director of [Inside Schools](#), [told](#) the Wall Street Journal.

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Barron said that the layoff had been a "red herring" put forth by a "bully mayor." And in a statement released after the vote, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer said, "Let's be honest -- the threat to lay off teachers was a political ploy from the get-go. "

James Oddo, the leader of the Council Republicans, agreed. "There is a lot of kabuki theater that does on between the mayor and the council" on the budget," he said. When asked earlier in the week whether he had hurt his credibility, Bloomberg reportedly responded with the familiar litany of what he sees as his accomplishments. "If that isn't credibility, I don't know what I could possibly do," he said the reporters.

Bloomberg also said the continued existence of last in, first out prompted him to accept the deal.

"Because we still have LIFO the consequences of laying off there would have been devastating," he [said](#) . "It would just not have been fewer people that provide a service; it would have gotten rid of some of the best and brightest that we've been able to attract, and it would also have caused chaos because of all the bumping requirements in the UFT contract."

Wait Until Next Year

The budget leaves a number of issues unresolved. Though the exact numbers vary, current projections see the city facing a deeper budget hole for 2013 than it did this year. In his statement announcing this budget, the mayor already looked ahead to what he forecast as a shortfall of nearly \$5 billion for the next fiscal year. The Independent Budget Office [foresees](#) a smaller but still considerable budget gap of about \$4.1 billion.

Given that teacher layoffs and fire company closing may well be in the mayor's budget next year, along with cuts to libraries and pools, some council members have already begun to call for higher taxes. As soon as the budget passed yesterday, members of the [Progressive Caucus](#) introduced a resulting called for the council to endorse extension of the state's millionaires tax.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Michael Bloomberg have opposed such a move and

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essentially taken the topic off the table. By moving now the members hope to get it back on.

"I hope next year we can stretch these parameters ... and research revenue measures that maybe this year were too late," Williams said. "There must be something better next year."