

The Civil Rights Agendas in 2002

by {ga=ahumm}

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Civil rights advocates are hopeful about the changeover in city government. They see an outgoing mayor who became involved in lawsuits on everything from the content of museum exhibits to the right to hold press conferences on the steps of City Hall. They note an incoming mayor who has already indicated that he hopes the city will get involved in fewer such lawsuits during his tenure.

And they see a new City Council that is itself full of members with roots in civil rights movements. Robert Jackson of West Harlem's [District 7](#) , for example, was the plaintiff in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity's lawsuit against the state seeking more funding for City schools; Hiram Monseratte of Jackson Heights'

[District 21](#)

who is a board member of the New York Civil Liberties Union.

"We hope that the City Council and new administration will usher in a new era in government policy," says Donna Lieberman, who just officially became the executive director of the [New York Civil Liberties Union](#) . (She had been the acting director since Norman Siegel departed to run for Public Advocate). Lieberman has a full agenda for New York's new elected officials. "There are issues about policing, Civilian Complaint Review Board effectiveness, ending racial profiling, and openness in government," she said.

Esmeralda Simmons, longtime director of the [Medgar Evers Center for Law and Social Justice](#) , said that their priorities going into 2002 include fighting tuition vouchers, "participating in the freedom and security debate," criminal justice issues, and seeing to it that adequate funding is maintained for lawyers for indigent defendants. "We have our work cut out for us."

The [Empire State Pride Agenda](#) , the biggest gay and lesbian lobbying group in New York, will continue under new executive director Joe Grabarz (a former state senator from Connecticut) to pursue two immediate objectives -- a transgender rights bill and another to require contractors to provide domestic partner benefits. "Bloomberg supports both bills, but he has spoken out for exemptions for religious groups "and possibly others" on the contractors issue.

Most of these issues will be tackled by Bloomberg's new deputy mayor for policy, Dennis Walcott, the longtime head of the [New York Urban League](#) , whose organization was in the

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thick of the civil rights movement under Whitney Young in the 1950s and '60s, but has become "more service oriented" in recent years, as Walcott explained on the day of his appointment. "We've always been involved in police-community issues," though, he added.

But the members of the City Council say they will pursue a civil rights agenda of their own as well - and not just the representative from the Upper West Side, though certainly her. Gale Brewer, from [district 6](#), is pleased with Bloomberg's choice of police commissioner, Raymond Kelly. "I think there'll be a different relationship between the police and the community." Brewer, a veteran of the women's movement, also has concerns about gay issues, domestic violence, and the availability of safe abortion in City hospitals.

Simcha Felder is the new representative from Borough Park's [District 44](#) in Brooklyn and said, "Despite being very much in favor of police, the Gideon Bush issue taught us that we have to resolve the way the police handle the emotionally disturbed." Bush, an orthodox Jew, was shot dead by police when he brandished a hammer as they tried to arrest him several years ago.

Michael McMahon of [district 49](#) on the north shore of Staten Island, is proud of the community policing in his district, but did cite "complaints about real estate brokers refusing to show people of color houses in certain neighborhoods," a matter for investigation by the Human Rights Commission.

Other issues cited range from environmental racism to racial profiling to workers' rights.

Andy Humm is a former member of the City Commission on Human Rights. He is co-host of the weekly Gay USA on Channel 35 on Thursdays at 11 PM.