

Shrinking Accountability: Proposed Changes To The Mayor's Management Report

by {ga=gpasanen}

Thursday, October 09, 2003 12:00 AM

Mayor Michael Bloomberg has taken a second step in his quiet plan to diminish the role of the city charter-mandated mayor's management [report](#) , the city's key tool for judging mayoral performance. The September management

[report](#)

for fiscal year 2003 (in pdf format) reflects the first step, the slimmed-down text he introduced a year ago. The second step is the mayor's charter revision commission's August proposal to eliminate one of the two annual management reports. This proposal (

[in pdf format](#))

is buried among several unrelated changes in ballot question #5 for the November 4 election.

The commission's proposal is disingenuous and anti-democratic. It misreads the intent of the charter mandate, shrinking its accountability mechanisms rather than enhancing them. The key question, which the mayor and commission sidestep, is what the two annual reports are supposed to do. The City Council argued for years that Mayor Rudy Giuliani ignored the fundamental role of the management reports. Now Mayor Bloomberg repeats that error. Together, the two annual reports are supposed to link budgets to service delivery. Accountability stems from knowing what each dollar in the budget buys. Without the budget-service links, we are left with widget-counting.

In proposing the elimination of the February report, the charter revision commission argues, for example, that it is outdated, ineffective, and too expensive. Because the commission does not offer any new ideas on how performance will be measured in the single annual report, it is simply arguing that less is more. Furthermore, the current, streamlined September mayor's management report is not a good model. It has some virtues - neighborhood statistics, five-year trends in data, internet accessibility, concise agency mission statements, for example - but it is weak in such basic management-reporting areas as budget targets, timely data, and productivity measurements.

THE 2003 MAYOR'S MANAGEMENT REPORT

The September report is a useful guide to city policies and services, particularly at the neighborhood level. There are local maps, indicator definitions, data-saving and manipulation devices, and a lot of information. This permits much "customizing" of the data and should be a valuable asset for managers, community service advocates, and researchers.

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But the report's weaknesses outweigh its new accessibility. One major limitation is the lack of any mayoral overview. There is no introduction, no summary, and no prospective vision. Rather, there are over 200 "critical objectives" in city agencies (the first: "Reduce smoking and the illness and death caused by tobacco use," and the last: "Encourage the contribution and use of donated materials.") These broad, bland objectives are followed by similarly brief "performance highlights," and then occasionally useful "performance reports."

True, there are some clues to the mayor's priorities. The Human Resources Administration, a \$6 billion agency, is clearly not a priority, with only three broad critical objectives ("Provide public assistance, food stamps or medicaid benefits to eligible individuals and families.") and only three and a half pages of performance reports on those objectives.

The Department of Education, a \$12.5 billion agency now under the direct control of the mayor, gets a little more attention - 12 critical objectives ("Increase attendance" is the first; the last is "Work with the School Construction Authority to design, construct, modernize and repair durable, functional and attractive education facilities, on schedule and within budget.") followed by seven and a half pages of performance reports. Unfortunately, 24 of the 46 major performance indicators (52 percent) have no 2003 information, so that the most recent data on such matters as graduation and drop-out rates are 15 months old.

One of the most obvious agencies for judging mayoral performance is the Department of Sanitation, where the closing of the Fresh Kills landfill has resulted in huge new costs. But the three pages of performance reports are uninformative, with new detail provided about snowfall and salt used last winter, but little about current and prospective costs of trucking 12,600 tons of waste out of the city daily. Several cost-per-ton indicators have no 2003 data nor any targets for fiscal year 2004. (The agency says changes in policy during the year have delayed estimates.) The nearly 40 percent increase in sanitation costs (now \$1 billion a year) in just four years would seem to call for a fuller analysis.

The September report also falls victim to the widget-counting data that Rudy Giuliani loved. The number of pages actually increased by 36 percent over last September's report, largely due to the inclusion in each agency of the number of calls into the agency on the new 311 phone line. We now know, for instance, that there were 7,228 calls to the Department of Transportation about "dangerous" ("priority") potholes and 6,360 calls about (not dangerous? non-priority?) other potholes reported during a 4-month period ending June 30. What's the point? But there is minimal current and prospective cost data about road repair costs, and one big success in 2003 - 89 percent of potholes filled within 30 days - prompts a planning target for 2004 of only 65 percent.

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BALLOT QUESTION #5: VOTE NO

The 2003 charter revision commission has posed three ballot questions for the November 4 election. Question #3 is the widely discussed nonpartisan election issue. Question #4 makes adjustments to the city's contracting process. Number 5 is entitled "Government Administration," and includes four unrelated changes:

• expand mayoral authority over the city's administrative law practices

• permit the Conflicts of Interest Board to increase penalties

• change the structure of the Voter Assistance Commission

• "require annual publication only of the Mayor's Management Report. The Preliminary Mayor's Management Report would no longer be required."

Since the current charter mandate on the management reports is about mayoral accountability, it is disingenuous to call the change "administrative." This is a proposed change about the reporting responsibilities of the city's highest elected official and the public's access and use of that information. It is an important question that deserves more than the brief attention it received in the mayoral-dominated charter revision commission.

The Commission in its final report gives three reasons for the elimination:

• "it is no longer necessary as a result of technological advances which allow for greater public accountability.

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Â· it is not an effective means of assessing or improving agency performance; and

Â· it is relatively expensive to produce without a lot of 'bang for the buck' in terms of reporting on the delivery of citywide programs and services."

This is a rather lame rationale, a mix of throwing the baby out with the bathwater and saying the mayor can't produce a cost-effective report, a curious admission of managerial defeat.

The speaker of the City Council, Gifford Miller, strongly opposes the elimination of the February report. (The council will hold a hearing at City Hall on Question 5 on October 16, 2003, at 10 am.) The council position is important because the management reports are directed to the council, and the council is currently mandated to hold agency hearings on those reports and issue its own findings. During the Giuliani years the council aggressively used the mayor's management report hearings to question agency spending and make the case for enhanced performance indicators. One of its [reports](#) (In PDF format) from March 2001 illustrates the importance of the February preliminary mayor's management report:

"The Charter clearly intends the [preliminary mayor's management report] to relate performance measures to proposed budget appropriations so that the council, its mandated recipient, can consider what agencies have accomplished or produced with the resources allocated, and the effect of budget proposals, during the budget process. The [preliminary mayor's management report] otherwise falls far short of achieving its intended purpose|.

"Absent a precise delineation of the link between specific appropriations (past or proposed) and programmatic performances, the [mayor's management report] fails to provide the legislative body with the information it needs in order to assess the results of prior funding decisions and determine appropriate funding levels for the future." The elimination of the February management report also eliminates the charter mandate of council hearings and reports. The council would, according to the commission, retain its council oversight powers (Sections 28 and 29 of the charter) and, therefore, by implication, could choose to continue such hearings and reports. But that, of course, substitutes political discretion for constitutional mandate.

In a city whose constitution already gives its mayor extraordinary power, particularly on budget matters, any enhancement of those powers is worth examining closely, particularly when so

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clearly prompted and packaged by the mayor himself. The City Council and public in general are too often out of the budget loop, and they need all the information, analysis and power the city charter can give them.

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