Council Approves Hurricane Sandy Property Tax Relief

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NEW YORK — The City Council passed a bill yesterday aimed at helping homeowners whose property was seriously damaged or rendered uninhabitable by Superstorm Sandy.

The bill extends the deadline for homeowners to pay their next property tax bill, from Jan. 1, 2013, to April 1, 2013. The extension is interest-free. Only those homes that the Department of Buildings has determined require major structural repairs or must be demolished are eligible.

"This is a small thing we are doing to help Hurricane Sandy victims, but it goes a long way," said

Councilman Vincent M. Ignizio, a Republican from Staten Island whose district is still reeling from the damage caused by the storm.

The bill was one of a handful passed by the Council at its regular stated meeting yesterday, including one to extend the landmark biotechnology credit created in 2009, and another that calls on new buildings to set aside space for recyclables.

A number of bills also were introduced, including one that critics say would give unions and corporations unfettered ability to spend money to influence elections. The bill, backed by Quinn, was introduced without remarks.

PROPERTY TAX RELIEF

Staten Island Councilmen James Oddo and Ignizio proposed the bill extending property tax relief to Hurricane Sandy victims. The Republicans represent some of the coastal communities hardest-hit by the storm.

"The genesis of this is a business owner on Staten Island," Oddo told the Council. "On top of everything else he's going through, [he] pointed to his business and said, 'I have a $13,000 tax bill I have to pay." While the current bill won't bring him relief from his business tax, Oddo said it will help provide property tax relief for his home "that was wiped out."

Ignizio said the property tax relief would also help his constituents: "I just wanted to give voice to some of my constituents, in this case Mike Abruzzo, who has lost his home totally, to nothing. In fact if you walk where his home is today, it's just his kitchen floor which managed to survive because it was built on a slab. And there's absolutely nothing there."

"Throughout the process of working with Mike," Ignizio continued, "he said to me, "I'm down on my luck, everybody wants to help and I know in a couple months we're going to be sent a property tax bill, and if anybody can help with things like that it would be appreciative.'"

He said he hoped that there would be a more "robust conversation" around commercial property taxes for owners "who are getting bills for $15,000 to $20,000, for businesses that no longer

exist."

The bill was announced by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Quinn and Finance Department Commissioner David M. Frankel on Nov. 29. They also said at the time that they would push for a rebate to homeowners on their property taxes to better reflect post-Sandy values. That measure would require the support of the state Legislature, which is tied up in a squabble over who will control the Senate.

A separate piece of legislation sponsored by Oddo and passed by the Council yesterday seeks to make property tax bills more transparent for residents, by requiring the Department of Finance to create a brochure to explain tax bills, as well as abatements and exemptions available to property owners.

BIOTECHNOLOGY TAX CREDIT AND RECYCLABLES

The Council also voted to extend the biotechnology tax credit, until Dec. 31, 2015. The credit, created under state legislation passed in 2009, aims to encourage investment in the biotechnology sector. Capped at $3 million per year, the credit has been criticized for being underwhelming compared to incentives dangled by other states and counties looking to horn in on the biosciences industry.

Councilwoman Jessica Lappin, the sponsor of the bill, said the biotech credit had been "successful in keeping small businesses in the city."

Another measure passed at the Council meeting would require new buildings to make space for recyclables as they do for refuse. The bill aims to divert waste from landfills.

"We hope to make the act of recycling as built into our daily routines as brushing our teeth is in the morning," said Councilman Dan Garodnick, the sponsor of the legislation.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE BILL

Already the subject of debate among policymakers since it was announced last week, Council members introduced a campaign finance bill that would make it possible for unions and

corporations to to spend unlimited amounts of money in coordination with candidates for political office.

The bill, sponsored by Councilwoman Rosie Mendez of Manhattan, is backed by Quinn, an expected candidate for mayor next year.

The city's Campaign Finance Board has said the bill "would open a gaping loophole in a system routinely praised as a national model for reform" and would "allow unions and corporations to operate above the law."

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Image of Speaker Quinn and NYPD Officer Lawrence DePrimo, by William Alatriste. The Council honored DePrimo at the stated meeting Dec. 10, for giving a homeless man a pair of boots — a benevolent act that was caught on camera.