

Council's First Meetings of 2007: Environmental Issues and City-Owned Buildings

by Joshua Brustein

Monday, January 15, 2007 12:00 AM

Every two weeks the New York City Council holds its "Stated Meeting" to introduce and pass legislation. As a regular feature, Gotham Gazette covers these meetings.

BUILDING HIGH SCHOOLS IN THE BRONX

A controversial \$230 million plan to build four schools on a toxic site in the Bronx will go ahead with added attention and public input regarding safety concerns, after a unanimous vote by the City Council at its Stated Meeting on January 9. The council delayed a vote on the project a month ago due to opposition from several members led by Maria del Carmen Arroyo, who represents the area.

The city's School Construction Authority plans to build two high schools, a middle school, and a charter school for 6th to 8th graders on the 6.6 acre site on Concourse Village West, between East 153rd and 156th streets. In all, the schools will accommodate about 2,400 students. The site, a former rail yard, was contaminated by a nearby dry cleaner and manufactured gas plant.

The authority originally planned for a \$30 million clean up, but an independent environmental consultant hired by community groups said that this might not be sufficient. Several council members from the Bronx said they opposed the plan, and in December the administration withdrew its application pending negotiations over the cleanup.

In an agreement reached late Monday evening, the administration agreed to consider the consultant's recommendations, which will be completed later this month. Administration officials will have the option of declining to implement these measures, but can only do so after explaining them during a public review process. The Bloomberg administration has also agreed to monitor for contamination at two nearby schools, PS 156 and PS 151, and the state Department of Environmental Conservation will clean a nearby site that is contributing to the contamination in the area.

Council members who initially opposed the plan praised the administration for compromising on the issues, and said they were satisfied. The council approved it 45 to 0.

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David Palmer of the New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, who worked with the community critics to bring in an outside consultant, said that it would have been better to get the report before approving the project, but was pleased that the public's safety concerns were taken into consideration.

"The public process sets a strong precedent for future school siting proposals on toxic properties," he said. "Given the problem of overcrowding schools, and the lack of available clean land in New York City, the issue is likely to keep coming up."

Indeed, the council said that it would begin work with the administration immediately to change the school siting process to make it more transparent. The current process allows for less community input than the city's standard review for land use projects, so that much-needed schools can be fast-tracked. Council Speaker Christine Quinn said that she agrees with this general outline, but that community concerns must be better integrated into process.

"The point is including the neighborhoods where these schools may go as early as possible in the process," she said. "Then if there is a site that there is a lot of opposition to that will be out there early — so we don't end up in a situation like this when we need an extension."

The council also passed a bill (<http://webdocs.nycouncil.info/textfiles/Int%200495-2006.htm?CFID=7007&CFTOKEN=92452565> Intro 495-a) that would set various deadlines for various actions to be taken by city officials, including the mayor's submission of his preliminary budget (February 12), Mayor's Management Report (February 23), and 10-year capital plan (March 28). That bill was passed 45-0.

Also, several council members opposed a council vote to <http://www.nysun.com/article/46433> sell two townhouses in Boerum Hill for below market value and to give tax breaks to the buyers. The sale was part of an existing agreement between the city and the federal government intended to revamp properties in struggling neighborhoods. David Yassky argued that real estate developers in the trendy Brooklyn neighborhood didn't need the incentives.

The proposal passed, with 39 yes votes, three no votes (Yassky, Alan, Gerson, and James Vacca), and three council members abstaining (Gail Brewer, Bill de Blasio, and Letitia James).

CHARTER MEETING -- ON-SITE POWER GENERATION FOR CITY-OWNED BUILDINGS

The City Council attempted to address concerns that the city's power supply may soon be overwhelmed at its meeting on January 3rd, by passing a bill that would require city officials to consider installing on-site energy generators in city-owned properties to reduce the strain on the power supply in the five boroughs.

New York City has been experiencing record energy demand over the last five years, prompting concerns that insufficient power supply could lead to higher prices, blackouts, and brownouts. A task force on energy estimates that the overall energy supply for New York City will be adequate only until 2012.

New power plants may be necessary, but building them could be technically and politically difficult; new power plants could also be damaging environmentally. Supporters of the bill believe having certain buildings create their own energy could ease stress on the system.

[Intro 18-a](#) would require the Department of Citywide Administrative Services to assess whether it could install on-site power generation systems on properties owned by city government that use a certain minimum amount of energy (a peak of 500 kilowatts). These properties include schools, public housing, facilities of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and office buildings. The council does not have the power to make such a requirement of private property owners.

Such on-site power systems would be required to be cleaner than natural gas power plants, and could use wind or solar power as well as fuel cell technology. The assessment would determine whether such projects are technically possible and economically feasible. It would have to be completed by January 1, 2008, and would be repeated once every five years.

The bill passed by a vote of 47 - 0 - 2. Councilmembers Diane Reyna and Larry Seabrook were absent.

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The meeting was the council's annual "charter meeting", which the city charter requires the council hold on the first Wednesday of every calendar year. It functions like a regular stated meeting. The power bill was the only piece of legislation considered.

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