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Councilmember James Oddo is afraid of metal baseball bats. Convinced that the bats pose an unreasonable danger to children, the Republican minority leader of the City Council has spent years fighting to ban them.

Last week, Oddo got his wish. A its stated meeting on March 14, the council passed a bill (Intro 341-a) that would make New York City the first municipality to forbid their use high school leagues. The council also voted on bills related to domestic partnerships and bike safety, and swore in a new member.

METAL BAT BAN

Oddo's self-confessed fixation on metal bats has been met with a mixture of amusement, admiration, and scorn. He guessed that support for the bill came partly out of his colleague's desire for him to stop talking about bats.

"I know this is not the most pressing issue in the eyes of my colleagues or New Yorkers, but I believe in this bill," he said. "I don't like government overreaching, but when people fail to act, someone has to step in."

Oddo's concern about metal bats is about safety, but several other council members said the metal bats leave New York's young ballplayers at a competitive disadvantage, since the major leagues allow only wooden bats. Councilmember Leroy Comrie went as far as to suggest that the increasing proportion of foreign players in Major League Baseball is in part due to American players' lack of expertise with wooden bats.

But critics questioned the bill's underlying assumption that a baseball comes off of a metal bat faster than one struck by a wooden bat. Statistical evidence to back this up is patchy at best. Concerns were also raised about the cost of using wooden bats, which break and must be replaced more frequently than metal bats.

Companies that manufacture metal bats lobbied heavily against the bill. One manufacturer, Easton Sports, spent $134,000 trying to convince the council to vote against it, according to the New York Sun.

The editorial boards of local newspapers opposed the ban. The News wrote that it " meddles in the rules for sports â€“ a territory where lawmakers are most unwelcome." The Post called the safety of metal bats "
a non-issue
, except in the minds of busybodies like Oddo and his colleagues on the council," and said that the bill was "dumb."

The rancor had some council members on edge, as they jumped to Oddo's defense. Many members praised his perseverance during last week's meeting, and some had harsh words for the lobbyists and editorial boards.

"Anyone who goes after one of us goes after all of us, and will be dealt with," said Comrie.

But the criticism of the bill resonated with some members of the council.

“As much as this is an emotional and sensitive issue, sometimes you have to have facts, and the statistics are just not there," said Councilmember Tony Avella. Councilmember Melinda Katz, a ballplayer herself, says she hits harder with a wooden bat.

Proponents of the bill dismissed these arguments, saying that it was "common sense" that metal bats caused the ball to travel faster. Oddo did temper his bill to attract more support; originally it would have banned metal bats in Little Leagues, as well.

The council voted 39 to six to pass the bill, a sharp split by its standards. Avella, Inez Dickens, Dan Garodnick, Letitia James, Katz, and John Liu voted against the bill. Hiram Monserrate and David Weprin abstained.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg has left open the possibility that he will veto the bill, but the council has the votes to override.

DOMESTIC PARTNERS

The council also strengthened the city's law providing health care, city services, and other benefits to domestic partners. In 1998, City Hall passed a law granting domestic partners many of the same benefits as spouses. But the law did not give domestic partnerships every benefit, and new benefits for spouses that have been added since 1998 have not necessarily been extended to domestic partners. Intro 501-a would require that any city benefit provided to spouses also be provided to domestic partners.

Supporters say that the bill finishes what they had initially intended to do in 1998, but had not been able to for political reasons.

Rights of domestic partnerships have arisen as an issue recently in the Department of Homeless Services. Married couples at risk of homelessness are eligible for family housing. Under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, domestic partners were also eligible. But beginning in 2003, the Department of Homeless Services no longer recognized domestic partners as families, requiring them to separate in order to seek shelter. Hundreds of couples, the majority of them straight, were denied family housing, according to Patrick Markee of the Coalition for the Homeless. There are currently 9,300 families sleeping in the shelter system each month.

Mayor Bloomberg and Speaker Quinn agreed to change the Department of Homeless Services' policy in February. Markee said that the changes would prevent similar inequities in the future.

Council Speaker Christine Quinn saw last week's action as important for symbolic as well as practical reasons.

"We can't pass a civil marriage in the city of New York for same sex couples, but we can do the most that a municipal government can do," she said. "I hope that this does send a very strong message to those in our state and country who do have power over marriage."

The bill passed 42 to three. Simcha Felder, Dennis Gallagher, and newcomer Vincent Ignizio voted no. Darlene Mealy and James Oddo abstained.

The council also passed a resolution (Res. 366) asking the US Congress to reintroduce a bill that would allow citizens and legal residents to sponsor their same-sex partners for immigration to the United States in the same way that spouses can. That resolution passed by a vote of 39 to five, with Councilmembers Felder, Gallagher, Vincent Gentile, Ignizio, and James Vacca voting no. Three others â€“ Mealy, Oddo, and Peter Vallone â€“ abstained.

BIKES, TRANS FATS, VOTING MACHINES AND FLAVORED MILK

The council passed two bills related to bike safety.

Intro 24-a would require businesses whose employees use bicycles to provide them with bike helmets, and to require employees to wear them. Those employers who do not would be held criminally liable, while commercial bike riders would face a fine for riding without a helmet. That bill passed 46 to one, with Avella voting no.

Intro 58-a would require such businesses to post bicycle safety procedures and the rules of the road in English, Spanish, and any other language used by those riding bikes for their jobs. That bill passed 45 to two, with Gallagher and Vacca voting no.

The council also voted to ban trans fats, which would effectively make the Board of Health's rules city law. That bill passed 46 to one, with Avella voting no.

The council passed a resolution (131-a) encouraging New York State to certify Paper Ballot Optical Scan voting systems as the new voting technology for New York City.

Another resolution (267-a) encourages the Department of Education to reconsider serving flavored milk in public schools. Currently schools only serve 1 percent and non-fat milk, with chocolate milk available occasionally. The council would like the department to consider serving strawberry and vanilla milk in cafeterias, as well.

NEW COUNCIL ASSIGNMENTS

Also at the meeting, a new councilmember was sworn in â€“ Vincent Ignizio of Staten Island. Ignizo left the State Assembly to replace Andrew Lanza, who left the council to go to the State Senate. Ignizio will serve on the education, environmental protection, land use, standards and ethic, transportation committees, and the planning, dispositions & concessions subcommittee, part of the land use committee. Ignizio was to have been sworn in earlier, but a controversy over the eligibility of another newly elected member, Matheiu Eugene, delayed the ceremony. Eugene won the seat formerly held by Yvette Clarke, but his residency was brought into question. Another special election to fill that seat will be held April 24, with Eugene running again.

Letitia James was named as the chair of the contracts committee, taking Clarke's position. The appointment comes with a $10,000 stipend.

Jessica Lappin gave birth since the last stated meeting, and did not attend.

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