

Stated Meeting: Easing Parking Rules and Opposing Gas Drilling

by Gail Robinson

Tuesday, November 17, 2009 12:00 AM - Last Updated Wednesday, June 06, 2012 10:15 AM

In its first meeting since Mayor Michael Bloomberg won re-election by a narrower than expected margin, the City Council took on the administration's enforcement of parking regulations and passed four bills on how the city issues tickets. The mayor has vowed to veto at least one of them.

At Monday's stated meeting, the council also approved a land use measure paving the way for a new police academy in College Point and passed a resolution calling for the state to ban drilling for natural gas in the city's upstate watershed.

The parking rules, though, attracted the attention and heated discussion. The most controversial of the measures, [Intro 907](#), would allow drivers a five-minute grace period at MUNI meters and after alternate-side parking restrictions go into effect.

The other bills would ease parking restrictions on members of the clergy, require advance notification of changes in parking meter rules, and improve procedures alerting people of parking regulation changes and make it easier for drivers to avoid being fined for offenses five days after a new rule goes into effect.

Repealing the 'Ticket Tax'

In total, Council Speaker [Christine Quinn](#) said, the package would make enforcement of parking rules in the city clearer and fairer. Supporters said they would bring some courtesy and common sense to a [system](#) that now, justifiably or not, angers many New Yorkers.

Several members accused the administration of using tickets to raise money rather than to move traffic and protect public safety. "Fines and tickets and fees are not supposed to be revenue generators," Quinn said.

The mayor reiterated Monday that he would veto the grace period bill. "I think it's a very misguided piece of legislation," he [said](#), adding, "A five-minute grace period is only going to lead to chaos and enormous increases in the number of contested tickets, and in argument."

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Quinn, though, said the bill reflects the fact that "everyone isn't on some universal clock."

According to Councilmember [Simcha Felder](#), one of the bill's sponsors, 300,000 tickets out of more than 1.4 million issued in 2007 were given within five minutes of the time a regulation went into effect or the meter ran out. Neither Felder nor Quinn would estimate how much not issuing those tickets would cost the city -- but it stands to be at least several million. Council members, though, said that is beside the point.

"If the administration wants to say this is about revenue, then we should call it a ticket tax and issue it to people who don't even have cars," Felder said.

The bill passed by 47 to 2, with members [Tony Avella](#) and [Daniel Garodnick](#) voting no. ([Maria Baez](#) did not attend yesterday's meeting reportedly because of medical problems.) This provides well in excess of the number of votes needed to override any veto.

Religious Exemption

The bill on the clergy, [Intro 0662-A](#), would allow members of the clergy with a permit to park for extended hours near their houses of worship and outside a hospital or a funeral establishment. It would also provide permits to clergy who work in New York City but live outside the state and to those who work for at least 20 hours for a religious organization even if they do not receive full-time pay.

"God's work is not controlled or dictated by traffic rules," said Councilmember [Letitia James](#), speaking for the measure.

While supporting the intro, a number of council members said it does not go far enough.

"It's a shame we even have to have this type of bill," said Councilmember [Helen Foster](#), whose father is a minister. "Common sense and common courtesy indicate that, particularly in

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the black community, the black clergy is where you go first" when someone has died, is sick or in trouble."

She urged the mayor to sign the bill, saying if he did not he would be "sending a message that what you [clergy] do is not important."

Sending Out a Warning

[Intro 1017-A](#) would require the Department of Transportation to give advance notice of permanent and temporary changes in parking restrictions. It also allows any driver who gets a ticket for violating the rules within five day of the rules change to contest the ticket -- assuming the car was legally parked under the old regulations.

The fourth measure, [Intro 1076-A](#) , was apparently prompted by a rash of tickets issued after the city changed meters to reduce the amount of time one bought for 25 cents from 30 minutes to 20. It requires the city to provide 30 days notice of any such change and to alert people through mail, email and the Department of Transportation website.

"An orange parking tickets should never be the most common way of discovering the rules have changed," said Councilmember [Vincent Gentile](#) , a sponsor of the bill.

All these measures passed by a vote of 49 to 0.

A New Era?

Whether or not Monday's meeting signals the emergence of a more [assertive City Council](#) , much of the rhetoric had a decidedly harsh tone with even some allies of the mayor, such as Felder, criticizing the administration.

"Do you have any doubt there are de facto quotas for traffic agents in this city?" Councilmember Lew Fidler asked. "The people of New York City are sick and tired of being sick and tired of being ticketed to death."

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Councilmember James Vacca said he hopes the bills will lead to "a discussion about traffic enforcement fairness" in the city. Now, he said, "people feel the city is judge and jury" and that motorists are guilty until proven innocent.

Last week the New York Post [reported](#) that the level of passion about the parking issue prompted Quinn, who has worked closely with the mayor, to postpone debate and voting on parking until after the election.

Quinn denied that. "These bills were not delayed as a favor to anyone," she said yesterday.

The New Police Academy

The council voted 47 to 2 to approve construction of the new police academy on a 35-acre site in College Point, Queens. It would replace the current academy on East 20th Street in Manhattan and also consolidate at a single location other training facilities, such as a driving course and target range, which are now scattered throughout the city. Once complete, the new school would be able to accommodate 1,900 recruits at a time as well as classes for officers already on the job.

"If you want a better police force, you need a better training facility," said Councilmember [Peter Vallone](#) in support of the new school.

The measure passed by 47 to 2, with Barron and Avella voting no.

"I don't know what they're training these people in," said Barron. "We have people coming out of that academy who don't know how to respect the rights, constitutional rights of black and Latino citizens."

In casting his vote, Councilmember [Alan Gerson](#) expressed concern that the [New York City Police Museum](#)

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remain in downtown Manhattan and not be moved to the College Point location, although Gerson said there might be justification for some kind of museum there as well.

Restricting Gas Drilling

The existence of natural gas reserves in upstate New York threatens to put upstate economic interests against those of New York City. Much of the land in the so-called [Marcellus Shale formation](#) lies in New York City's watershed. Environmentalists and other have [expressed concern](#) that extracting the gas -- drilling and then pumping in millions of gallons of water mixed with various chemicals -- could endanger the city's drinking water.

"This could lead to a situation where the water supply would be degraded," said Councilmember [James Gennaro](#), who has lead opposition to the drilling, and could require the city to build filtration plants which, 10 years ago, were estimated to cost \$10 billion. "It's hard to imagine how this could even be proposed by the state, Gennaro said.

The decision whether to allow the drilling rests with the state. But in a voice vote yesterday the council passed [Resolution 2191](#) calling on the state to ban drilling in the city's watershed. It also urges the federal government to regulate the process under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act.

Quinn said the measure was necessary even though the one company that wanted to drill, [Chesapeake Energy](#), has [backed away](#) from its plans. Saying the company was "forced out," Quinn continued, "We want to make sure that if anyone wants to come back and do it again, we're not interested."