by Courtney Gross
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Who knew there were provisions for wagons and regulations for kite flying around the city's telegraph system within the city's fire code.

Well, no more.

After a three-year review, the City Council unanimously approved a revised fire code on Wednesday. The code was last revised in 1913. In response to changing times, the update requires more informative evacuation plans and includes construction sites into fire safety management.

In addition to updating the code, the council also approved a budget modification to fiscal year 2008 -- initially approved last June -- which included an additional $2.2 billion surplus from tax revenues. The move sparked some opposition from several council members, who said they did not have enough time to review the documents and questioned the additional surplus found by the administration.

The council also approved a lease for a recycling station in Sunset Park.

The Fire Code

The city's new fire code (Intro 732-A) will bring the city's standards in line with the International Fire Code and with the city's recently revised building code in order to improve safety conditions, said officials.

The plan, which goes into effect in July, will require the development of a fire safety program for construction sites and provisions for rooftop access. Under the new code, temporarily vacant buildings will also have to maintain their fire safety systems.

"Oh course it's not as sexy as the building code," said Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta. "But it's still very, very important."

Many of the new provisions might pertain to tragedies like the Deutsche Bank fire last August, where the fire safety system, including the building's standpipes, was not fully maintained while it was being taken down floor by floor.

Though some buildings, like the the United Nations, will not be covered by the fire code, because they are out of the fire department's jurisdiction. Scoppetta said the department is in the process of reviewing some of these so-called loopholes.

Scoppetta said the department's primary focus was on safety, but it did consider some of the code's economic impact on construction and building costs. Officials said the City Council and the department received feedback from multiple industries, from fire extinguisher companies to real estate boards.

A Revised Budget

What is typically a procedural issue turned controversial on Wednesday when the City Council considered a budget modification that took a unexpected $2.2 billion surplus and used it to prepay debt in 2009 and 2010.

Though the council approved the change unanimously, members raised concerns that they had not had enough time to review the documents. The budget modification, which is an inch thick and about 130 pages, was released to some members during a political meeting 24 hours before the vote.

"There should be a minimum time period," said Councilmember Alan Gerson.

The vote came on the heels of an effort by Council Speaker Christine Quinn, who has presented herself as a reformer and champion of transparency, to make the budget process more transparent following the City Council's slush fund scandal
.

Other members questioned the use of the city's surplus -- especially when the Department of Education is facing budget cuts .

Both Quinn and the council's Finance Committee chair David Weprin said paying down debt was a smart move.

"It may appear that the city is flush with money, but we're not," said Quinn. "We have to use that money to pre-pay debt or we'll be in a worse place."

Councilmember Lewis Fidler and others questioned the administration's motive for this newfound surplus. Fidler suggested the over estimation of spending and under estimation of revenues during budget negotations could be a tactic to keep the City Council's spending in check. The council has to approve a balanced budget by June 30. But if a surplus appears later in the year, the mayor can determine where the extra money will go.

"The Office of Management and Budget underestimates revenue every year so we don't spend money they don't want us to spend," said Fidler. It's just another way of maneuvering the budget dance
, he added.

A Recycling Station

As part of the Bloomberg administration's solid waste management plan, approved by the City Council in 2006, the city is dispersing the recycling and waste facilities throughout the five boroughs.

As a result, Sunset Park will host a large recycling station, operated by the Sims Group, to manage part of the city's sorted trash. The station, which will receive material via barge, will be more than 1 million square feet. The council unanimously approved the lease of the 30th Street Pier to the Sims Group for the facility.

To see how else the city manages its waste, check out Gotham Gazette's Garbage Game . Â