

Boro Budget Hearings Outline Needs

BY RICHARD GENTILVISO

By mandate of the City Charter, borough boards hold a public hearing every year to establish budget priorities, even though services and entitlements are mostly fixed into the \$52.5 billion city preliminary budget released by Mayor Michael Bloomberg on January 31. Almost 200 speakers testified before the Queens Borough Board during the day-long session on February 9.

"Service demands are increasing," Borough President Helen Marshall said. Moreover, she added, many programs and services are struggling with rising costs. "No increase [in funding] is definitely a cut."

"Our challenge for the coming year is significant. All funding allocated in the 2006 adopted budget by the city council has been eliminated. These funds provide vital services including HPD's community consultant program, the Neighborhood Preservation and Development Program, DBS' funding for local development organizations as well as many other programs for youth. The preliminary budget also reduces funding to our cul-

tural institutions and programs as well as another reduction in our subsidy to libraries."

City Councilmember David Weprin, chair of the council Finance Committee, said although the city council successfully restored all cuts from last year's budget, the same cuts are back in the new Fiscal '07 budget, to begin July 1.

Calling the process "base-lining", Weprin said the council would have to start over again to get back to the same funding levels restored at the end of last year (June 30, 2005). The council is seeking to restore \$322 million in cuts this year.

Weprin decried the process, calling it a budget dance, and said, "We [Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Weprin] are committed to try and stop this. We spend too much time on this budgetary dance."

Councilmember John Liu, chair of the council Transportation Committee, agreed with Weprin that the annual circumstance of cut and restore was, he said, "a dance we could do without". Still, Liu said solid funding for boroughwide programs is very important.

Councilmember Peter Vallone Jr., chair of the council Public Safety Committee, acknowledged priorities for the mayor and the city council don't always match, he said: "Our priorities are to keep our streets clean of garbage and graffiti and, most important, to keep our streets safe."

Community Board 1 District Manager George Delis thanked Vallone for his efforts to beef up criminal penalties for graffiti. "We have a real problem in our community with graffiti. We've got to appropriate money to combat graffiti for cleanup, patrols, and prosecution," he said.

Delis also requested funding for a proposal to build a new exit off the Grand Central Parkway at 73rd Street, westbound. "The traffic backup is very dangerous," he said. In addition, more parking was needed for the 114th Police Precinct, which is alongside the Grand Central Parkway.

Although \$100,000 has been appropriated for a fence around Athens Square Park, Delis asked that the Department of Parks make this job a priority. "This is one of the most utilized parks in Queens County for its size," he



Photo by Dominick Totino

Queens Borough President Helen Marshall and members of the City Council listen to testimony during Thursday, February 9, hearing by Borough Board on the Mayor's Preliminary Budget. (L): City Councilmember: Peter Vallone Jr, Joseph Addabbo and David Weprin.

said. He also requested funding for increased pruning and maintenance of trees, saying, "Queens has more trees than all the other boroughs combined."

Finally, Delis requested additional funding to support the expansion of the Museum of the Moving Image and not cuts to cultural institutions, in general.

Aside from their districts' individual priorities, most district managers of the representatives who testified in their stead made

similar requests, as did the heads of cultural and social service institutions.

Although there is a budget surplus of \$3.3 billion this year, Bloomberg is proposing to use the surplus to pay down city debt and other long-term costs. An anticipated 15 percent increase in expenses such as Medicaid, pensions, employee benefits and debt service has the city projecting a deficit of \$3.4 billion for the next budget year, 2008.

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