

Spitzer Scores Pressing 'Member Item' Reform

Earlier this month, incoming Governor Eliot Spitzer made several speeches in which the new chief executive dumped on the state legislature. A joint announcement by the governor, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno that sweeping reforms of the state budget process would be undertaken followed the speeches—a clear victory for Spitzer.

Spitzer's victory came on his 16th day in office and was fueled simultaneously by Spitzer's sweeping election victory last September and a furious assault on several legislative practices, most particularly "member item" abuses.

Member items, the practice of state legislators and the governor divvying up a \$200 million pot of taxpayer money and keeping where all of it went secret and out of the budget, which had gone on for almost 10 years, had always been sharply criticized by organizations calling for government reform.

In recent years, the volume of criticism had sharply increased, and within the past several weeks, Silver and Bruno agreed to release the list of who got how much and where it went.

The disclosure also showed that one of the chief abusers was Bruno himself. He gave huge amounts to a private, for-profit firm in which a close friend of the Majority

Leader held a major interest.

These grants have become the subject of an FBI investigation into Bruno's public and private activities.

Most of the organizations on the receiving end of member item funds, to our knowledge, are civic, church, senior and charitable groups in lawmakers' districts and are probably free of any wrongdoing. But the secrecy that surrounded the entire process was totally unwarranted and illegal, despite any explanations.

A single line in an announcement of budget reforms: "Lump sum appropriations, including member items, will be itemized" keeps the practice alive, but open for all to see.

Spitzer, in his explanation of the reforms agreed upon, appeared to be talking about this one particular item.

"For decades, the budget process has been characterized by secrecy, gamesmanship and a lack of accountability," he declared. "These common sense measures are an excellent first step toward opening up the process and helping ensure timely budgets with greater transparency and accountability."

Silver and Bruno, in their statements covering the reforms, also used similar language, with Silver saying, "We will have a more transparent, more easily understood budget process," and Bruno

stating, "These budget reforms will help bring greater openness, transparency and accountability to the budget."

With the state's top three officials on the same page, Spitzer has won a major victory at the outset of his first term as governor.

Other items agreed upon include "quick start" budget discussions commencing in November; an expedited consensus revenue process with the state comptroller resolving disputes over revenue; "plain language" used to provide information, and the legislature "statutorily" required to enact a balanced budget and to explain the fiscal impacts of changes made to the governor's budget items.

However, the April 1 start of the fiscal year, remains the same and no mention was made of the creation of an independent budget office to make revenue projections victory.

HILLARY ENTERS RACE—FINALLY: It may have come a bit sooner than she liked, but United States Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton finally announced over the weekend that she's in the 2008 presidential race.

Clinton, considered the leader of the pack of Democrats seeking their party's nomination, stated last Saturday, "I'm in and I'm in to win."

Earlier she had put out a notice on the Internet, at her Web site, that she was forming an exploratory committee, which is pro forma for any candidate.

The whole world, up to that point, was

almost certain the 59-year-old lawmaker would be in the race, but she never gave an indication when she would officially announce her intentions.

As it happened, her nearest competition for the nomination, Illinois' junior U.S. Senator Barack Obama (D), forced Clinton's hand when he also announced he was forming an exploratory committee a week or so before her announcement.

Rather than giving Obama an early advantage in lining up supporters and contributors, Clinton decided the time was right to get in the fray.

Yet to enter the field, but also expected to take the plunge, are former Vice President Al Gore and U.S. Senator John Kerry. Both lost to George W. Bush in previous presidential elections.

The overcrowded Democratic field is a contributor's nightmare. There'll be a fierce fight for the millions of dollars which will fund their way to the candidates and which will probably be spread thin, although Clinton and Obama will no doubt command the lion's share of the huge pot.

CROWLEY ATTENDS GAY FESTIVAL: Congressmember Joseph Crowley, Queens Democratic leader and Chief Deputy Whip in Congress, this past Saturday led a small group of Queens lawmakers in this year's Winter Pride, an annual dinner dance for the Queens Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Pride Parade and Festival at the Astoria World Manor.

Others who announced they would attend were City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, state Senator John Sabini, Assemblymember Jose Peralta and Councilmember Eric Gioia, according to a release from Crowley's office.

The honoree at the affair was Congressmember Barney Frank (D-Massachusetts), one of two openly gay members of Congress. Crowley is a strong supporter of the GLBT community.

DOG FIGHT OVER S.S. VACANCY: Governor Eliot Spitzer and Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno are leading the battle for the opposing candidates running in the special election to fill the vacancy created when Spitzer appointed Long Island Republican Senator Michael Balboni to be his top public safety advisor.

Spitzer has been campaigning for Craig M. Johnson, a Nassau Democrat, and Bruno is backing Maureen O'Connell, a former Assemblymember.

Spitzer headlined a \$25,000-per-couple fundraising dinner for Johnson and also appeared in a television ad for the candidate.

O'Connell not only has Bruno's backing, but also Balboni's in the effort to maintain the Republicans' hold on control of the Senate. The Republican Campaign Committee gave O'Connell \$330,000 for her campaign shortly after Balboni sent \$110,000 from his account to the campaign committee.

O'Connell has also drawn the support of labor union powerhouse Local 1199 United Heath Care Workers, headed by Dennis Rivera.



Tax Relief Brought To Queens Residents



Gioia, c., Taylor, r., and Comrie, l., look on as a resident is pre-screened for the ERDA tax prep service.

tax prep site was tops in the City last year, returning nearly \$700,000 to neighborhoods in Western Queens and tripling the number of returns prepared since 2005 when the program began.

"We're rewarding hard work, cutting red tape, and expanding opportunity for New Yorkers, while also pumping millions of dollars into our City's economy," said Gioia, who represents Long Island City, Woodside, Sunnyside, Astoria and Maspeth in the City Council. "The people of New York work hard day in and day out and they're entitled to what is rightfully theirs. Far too many of our citizens are unaware of tax relief or are tricked into rapid rip-off scams, but with a free, trust worthy tax prep service in our neighborhood, some of the City's hardest workers will have that much more to smile about."

Councilmember Eric Gioia joined Bishop Mitchell G. Taylor, President of the East River Development Alliance, Councilmember Leroy Comrie, local leaders, advocates, and Queens residents to kick off the tax preparation season in Long Island City. For the third year in a row, Gioia and ERDA have partnered with FoodChange and Citizens for NYC to educate low-income New Yorkers about the tax credits they are entitled to and prepare their taxes for free provided they meet certain income thresholds. The free