

Is the First Blush About to Fade From Bloomberg?

By Conn Nugent

You have to wonder if Mayor Mike Bloomberg is having a good time. Late at night at the townhouse, does he smile in the mirror and say, "So what's on tap for tomorrow?" Or does he stare at the ceiling and mutter, "What have I bought?"

Certainly Hizzoner seems pretty upbeat. No agonizing about intractable crises, no whining about Albany or Washington. And though the press has sniped here and there, the Bloomberg trademark can-do-ism has won the mayor an extended media honeymoon. What's not to like?

Well, a lot, at least if you're someone with a healthy tendency to depression. The mayor inherited some big-time problems. And now he's making some of his own.

At the top of the list of inherited headaches is a truly terrible fiscal situation. Just a month after the mayor and City Council reached rather congenial agreement on a \$42.3-billion budget, Bloomberg announced that an additional \$1 billion would have to be cut. As Crain's publisher Alarr Townsend noted, even that no-longer-adequate June budget was achieved by piling on bond obligations to be paid later. Debt-service costs in 2006 will consume more than 19 percent of the city's tax revenues. Maybe an economic rebound will swell the municipal treasury by then. But for now, the local economy is stumbling. And its key industry, finance, has hit the pavement. Who knows, but Smilin' Mike may actually relish the opportunity presented by a billion-dollar short-

fall. For one thing, he has an excuse to downsize an underproductive labor force that's cheap per person but expensive in the aggregate. Accept buyout packages or face layoffs, he has told municipal workers. Contract talks are underway, and the mayor enjoys the significant negotiating advantages of general public support for belt-tightening and no IOUs to organized labor. But collective-bargaining victories will come at high political costs. Layoffs or meaningful cutbacks will occasion considerable telegenic fuss, and even dispassionate reporting on the surge of anti-Bloomberg rhetoric will effectively end any media honeymoon.



Education is another major inherited problem. So far Bloomberg has gotten what Rudy Giuliani always dreamed of: direct accountability. He has shelved the district councils, hired a chancellor of his own choosing, designated a

new headquarters within sight of City Hall, and announced a policy of bringing district superintendent offices into the central core. The mayor will get away with all these risky innovations if just one thing happens: Scores go up. If city students don't improve their scores on statewide reading and math tests, and if they don't improve them every year, then he'll be in trouble. Trouble with parents; trouble with politicians; trouble with the media; even trouble with genteel preservationists on what looks like an ill-suited use of the Tweed Courthouse.

The mayor is betting that city residents will stay on the side of an unpolliticized chief executive who's not afraid to grapple with problems untended by his predecessor: waste hauling, for example, or bus service. The hits he may take from

interest groups, he probably assumes, won't dent significantly the protective shield of broad-based public opinion. And he may be right.

Still, there's a whiff of hubris in the air. Hizzoner may be overreaching. Exhibit A for that argument is the newly empanelled Charter Revision Commission. This group of 13 appointees will frame referendum questions to amend the City Charter so that municipal candidates would appear on the ballot without party identification and so that the first deputy mayor, not the public advocate, would succeed the mayor in case of death or incapacity. The public advocate herself, Betsy Gotbaum, is pretty upset, and (reasonably) asks why Marc Shaw, Bloomberg's first deputy, would be a more appropriately democratic choice for acting mayor than she would. Civic groups decry the short (six weeks) and ill-timed (summer) period set aside for constitutional deliberations. Another coalition of public advocate and good-government forces easily defeated Giuliani's similarly ill-considered charter amendments of 1999.

Waiting in the wings, election lawyers ready a lawsuit to keep any commission proposal off the ballot. State law says that a mayorally appointed charter commission must examine "the entire Charter" before it can propose changes to any of the Charter's component parts. Maybe the commission can adequately cover the party label and succession issues before Labor Day. Maybe. But it's beyond unlikely that, in August, 13 residents of the Northern Hemisphere will read, much less examine, much less consider, a document as ponderous, intricate and quintessentially impenetrable as is the noble Charter of our town.

Take a breath, Mr. Mayor, and forget about this Charter stuff for a year or two. It's a bridge too far. Back to the budget.

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