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Thompson Prods Unions: Reach City Health Deal Urges Accelerated Talks

By ARI PAUL



The Chief-Leader/Michel Friang

'TIME FOR UNIONS TO STEP UP': Citing the need for 'shared sacrifice,' City Comptroller William C. Thompson Jr. told reporters following a City Council hearing that municipal unions should reach a deal to control city health costs.

City Comptroller William C. Thompson Jr. March 9 called on union leaders to reach agreement with Mayor Bloomberg on a way to control the city's health costs in light of the Mayor's demand that municipal workers pay for 10 percent of their health care.

Testifying before the City Council, the Comptroller also outlined alternatives to the Mayor's proposed budget, including an income tax hike on the wealthy rather than an increase in the city sales tax, and urged the Bloomberg administration to reduce overtime costs.

'Need Shared Sacrifice'

"During these times it is clear that you're at a time of shared sacrifice," he told reporters after the hearing. "In the past we've seen the unions during tough fiscal times, the unions stepped to the plate. They're asked by the Mayor, the Mayor sits down and they resolve things. That's what needs to happen right now."

Municipal Labor Committee Chair Harry Nespoli responded that the unions had already presented a \$160-million cost-savings plan to Labor Relations Commissioner James F. Hanley, but that the city was cool to the plan.

The MLC had proposed that \$100 million of the money would come from the Health Stabilization Fund that was established as a safeguard against a dramatic increase in healthbenefit costs. The other \$60 million would come from a mix of initiatives that included better administration of the city's health benefits program by both management and the insurers.

Mr. Nespoli said Mayor Bloomberg had sought \$200 million in healthcare cost reductions when he originally released his budget plan, but by the time he met with Mr. Hanley, City Hall had upped that figure significantly.

'Jacked It Up to \$550M'

"As we went into negotiations, he jacked it up to \$550 million, and we were still trying to resolve the \$200 million," he said.

Addressing the Council regarding rising overtime costs, Mr. Thompson said, "I want to emphasize that the city routinely underestimates the amount budgeted for this cost, which then widens the budget gap that must be closed. Last year alone, the city's overtime expenses for police, firefighters and civilian workers exceeded \$1 billion for the first time since Sept. 11. It would serve the city's budget process greatly if [the Office of Management and Budget] and the agencies were to budget overtime more realistically moving forward."

He rejected the Mayor's call for an increased sales tax, saying that such a plan was regressive and put the burden on poorer citizens, and instead called for an income tax increase for residents earning more than \$500,000 a year, from the current rate of 3.65 percent to 4.3 percent.

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Manhattan Councilman Robert Jackson asked why the Comptroller did not support a tax increase for those making more than \$250,000 a year, as the Working Families Party has proposed. Mr. Thompson responded that his office examined the difference in revenue generated from his plan and the WFP's proposal.

"It wasn't a substantial amount," he said.

While the Comptroller's testimony to the Council Finance Committee is routine in the yearly budget process, last week it set the stage for Mr. Thompson, who is seeking the Democratic nomination for Mayor, to counter Mr. Bloomberg's claim that he should get a third term because his business acumen makes him the best able to handle the current fiscal crisis.

When asked by a reporter how a Thompson administration might look different, the Comptroller promised more discussion on the issues.

"The discussions and the conversations would be a bit more inclusive. [I] would reach out to neighborhoods across the City of New York," he said. "I would be sitting at the table with the unions resolving issues now."

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