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News of the week

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Unions: Mayor Overreacts With Job Freeze and Cuts

Most Agencies to Chop 5.4%
By DAVID SIMS



STEPHEN GOLDSMITH: Sailing toward an iceberg of debt.

A hiring freeze and mid-year cuts of 2.7 percent for uniformed and education services and 5.4 percent for other agencies are part of Mayor Bloomberg's latest round of budget trimming, with Deputy Mayor Stephen Goldsmith warning that layoffs would be "inevitable" down the road.

Union officials said, however, that the moves were unwarranted and could prove counterproductive.

Memos sent Sept. 21 to agency heads by the Mayor and Budget Director Mark Page ask city department heads to prepare cuts of 5.4 percent for the current fiscal year and 8 percent for the next year, with uniformed and education agencies facing 2.7-percent and 4-percent cuts, respectively.

Would Save \$2B Over 2 Years

"In order to maintain a balanced budget this fiscal year and begin to close this year's gap, which is currently projected to be more than \$3 billion, we must reduce city funds spending," Mr. Bloomberg said in his memo. The proposed cuts would bring \$800 million in savings for this year and \$1.2 billion for next year.

At the same time, speaking at a breakfast sponsored by the Citizens Budget Commission, Mr. Goldsmith warned that layoffs would probably be necessary and that in the long term, public-employee pension and healthcare costs would need to be controlled.

"Unless some corrective action is taken soon, New York City runs the risk of becoming General Motors in the sense that we will be assuming a debt to retirees that is not sustainable," he said, according to an article in Crain's New York.

Municipal Labor Committee Chairman Harry Nespoli said that the Mayor was being fiscally prudent in ordering agencies to come up with budget cuts, adding he was optimistic that the fiscal picture would turn out better than the city's dire predictions.



"He's doing his budget and he's projecting a deficit. The last couple of times he projected a deficit, we ran a surplus," he said in a phone interview. "No one really knows what's going to happen, and he's going to have to manage."

'Cuts Would Hurt Public'

Mr. Nespoli said that the hiring freeze could be "kind of dangerous, especially with certain agencies that are in contact with the public on a regular basis. If they get short on manpower, that's a problem."

Uniformed Firefighters Association President Steve Cassidy said he

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HARRY NESPOLI: City's concerns exaggerated.

worried that the hiring freeze would have adverse effects down the line for the Fire Department. "I am concerned that they will use the likely escalation in overtime as a reason to close firehouses," he said in a phone interview.

"If they then turn around and use the fact that they can't hire Firefighters and because they are under headcount, they need to close firehouses, it will compromise public safety," he said, referring to the decision by U.S. District Judge Nicholas Garaufis barring the city from hiring new Firefighters unless it followed racial quotas. The city Sept. 17 announced it would hold off on hiring rather than accede to the Judge's guidelines.

DC 37: Bare-Bones Already

District Council 37 Executive Director Lillian Roberts said in a statement that the hiring freeze was misguided. "We're already working with bare-bones staffing in most agencies," she said. "Now, what does the Mayor do? He puts a freeze on citywide hiring of the very men and women who deliver these essential services."

She continued, "What he needs to do is put a freeze on outside contracts that prop up private consultants by squandering taxpayers' dollars on operations with cost overruns in the millions of dollars, like CityTime, or seek to sell off city services and throw experienced, dedicated city workers out on the street, like the Health and Hospitals Corporation restructuring plan."

But the hiring freeze is not absolute, as Mr. Page noted in his memo that "the only hiring that will move forward during this period will be for positions immediately impacting the public health and safety or positions which help maintain budget balance."

Mr. Nespoli said that Mr. Goldsmith's predictions of layoffs were irresponsible. "I don't think that's a wise statement to be making right now," he said. "I don't think you should be looking at layoffs. I think that the hiring freeze is a step to try and control something, to turn around and see where we're going to be in the future."

Unrealistically Gloomy?

Mr. Page's budget memo assumes the worst for the city's tax revenues next year, even while acknowledging that "the local economy has done better than we had forecast when the recession first began two years ago."

Mr. Nespoli said there were other reasons not to panic. "Tourists are still coming here, the revenues are still going up, and the reason why is that it's a safe, clean city," he said. "I'm the only one that's been saying the revenues will be getting better, and I'm the only one who's been right so far."

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