

Mayor Looks to Outrun 'Bill, Do Something' Cry

By RICHARD STEIER | Posted: Monday, December 21, 2015 5:30 pm

When a reporter recently asked a Correction Department employee what time an agency graduation ceremony was being held later that week, the reply was, "Whenever the Mayor shows up."

It turned out Bill de Blasio was on time, aided by the 11 a.m. scheduling of the event and his own determination in recent months that his image was taking a beating because of his penchant for being late, and not by a few minutes. The employee's less-than-thrilled response, however, indicated the Mayor hadn't yet laid his reputation to rest.

During a dinner among eight past and present reporters last week, the conversation veered into Michael Bloomberg's ability to use his money to buy support from interest groups the way interest groups have traditionally used financial or political assets to buy Mayors, and his added advantage of having the unbridled support of Wall Streeters who viewed him as one of their own.

Mr. de Blasio, whose campaign theme of addressing income inequality by taxing the rich was a broadside against those same people, is clearly in a different position, but when the discussion moved to what he could do to mend fences, one colleague said, "What I think Wall Street would really like to see is this guy put in a full day's work."



De Blasio_Floyd

OVERDUE BILL: His failure to initially grasp the severity of the homeless crisis and then provide an adequate response, even as his Deputy Mayor assigned to the issue quit because of disillusionment at the lack of attention being paid, reinforced perceptions of Mayor de Blasio (left) being in a bit over his head and reacting to crises rather than having a sound managerial strategy. Teamsters Local 237 President Greg Floyd summed up some of the doubts when asked about the Mayor's re-election chances, saying, 'At this point, I wouldn't support him. His administration has to show they have the wherewithal to get things done, and not for political reasons.'

'237' Head: Right Now, Wouldn't Support Him

That sentiment also came from the other side of the capital/labor divide. Teamsters Local 237 President Greg Floyd, who has clashed with the Mayor on matters ranging from his plans for the

Housing Authority to school security, discussing his feelings about a 2017 re-election run the following afternoon said, “At this point, I wouldn’t support him. His administration has to show they have the wherewithal to get things done, and not for political reasons.”

Those critiques are a corollary of the public perception of Mr. de Blasio: that despite his past experience as a mayoral aide in the administration of David Dinkins more than 20 years ago, he seemed to initially lack an appreciation of just how difficult and demanding the life of a Mayor can be: that the commercial crafted by David Garth for John Lindsay’s 1969 re-election run calling it “the second-toughest job in America” wasn’t necessarily hyperbole.

That criticism was given renewed currency last week with the departure of Homeless Services Commissioner Gilbert Taylor, which if it wasn’t a forced exit was one in which he was pointed in the direction of the door by the hand-off of some key duties to Human Resources Administration head Steven Banks.

The announcement came less than four months after Deputy Mayor Lilliam Barrios-Paoli disclosed she was stepping down in what sources said reflected her unhappiness at a lack of access to the Mayor and turf wars in which she was being outfought by her fellow deputy, Alicia Glen, who is spearheading the Mayor’s affordable-housing initiative.

Ms. Glen is viewed as a hard-charging Wall Street graduate who left a top position at the investment-banking firm Goldman Sachs. But Ms. Barrios-Paoli’s resumé in city government over four different mayoral administrations had given her the perfect grounding in the issues that must be coped with in reducing homelessness: she had headed HRA, the old Department of Employment and the Department of Housing Preservation and Development and was highly regarded by those with whom she had worked.

In Banks He Trust?

The Mayor said last week that the city was conducting a nationwide search for her successor. There has been some speculation, however, that he has already found him in Mr. Banks, the longtime Legal Aid attorney who specialized in representing the homeless. In that role, he won lawsuits that Police Commissioner Bill Bratton had in mind when he recently lamented the restrictions cops face in getting people off the street if they are not blocking public access, even if they seem incapable of taking care of themselves.

It was Mr. Banks’s remark Dec. 16 that the growing homeless problem represented an accumulation of failures by previous Mayors to take corrective steps—“it didn’t happen overnight”—that caught the attention of my colleagues during our dinner later that evening. The general feeling was that closing in on two years in office, Mr. de Blasio could no longer justify

blaming his predecessors for problems that seemed to be getting worse.

One criticism of Mr. Taylor, who had previously been a top executive in the Administration for Children's Services before the Mayor tapped him to run the Department of Homeless Services at the start of his administration, was that he was not a policy-maker or a particularly strong administrator. At a recent City Council hearing, he was unable to state how many homeless people were living on the street, even though this had been an increasing focus of media ranging from the Post to the Times since late spring. In the wake of Ms. Barrios-Paoli's departure at the end of September, according to the Post, the Mayor had relied increasingly on Mr. Banks to deal with issues that went beyond his transferring the power to award service contracts from DHS to HRA.

Crisis-Driven Approach?

In the meantime, though, he had also drawn friendly fire from Commissioner Bratton, who said Mr. de Blasio had been slow to grasp the urgency of the situation as roughly 50 homeless "encampments" sprung up around the city, something the Mayor himself had essentially conceded in early September in an interview with Brian Lehrer on WNYC. That delayed realization plays into two other criticisms of Mr. de Blasio: that he is too prone to react to crises and slow to address problems that haven't yet reached that stage, and his resistance to meaningfully engaging the public through town-hall meetings.

Mr. Floyd with no prompting cited the image of a Mayor following his bouncing polls. "When are we going to get real things done in real time and not because it's politically expedient, [with Mr. de Blasio] looking in the mirror and saying, 'What do I do now to help my polls?'"

The two town-hall gatherings the Mayor held in recent months—after previously claiming he hadn't scheduled any because he was getting plenty of feedback about community issues through his normal travels around the city—amounted to preaching to the choir, with the audiences hand-picked to ensure that no hostile questioners placed him in awkward situations with the TV cameras rolling. In seeking those climate-controlled environments, however, Mr. de Blasio was missing the point of such forums.

A Learning Experience

Even tough and openly hostile audiences tended to give past Mayors points for showing up and answering questions. It was not unusual to talk to people in largely black crowds after two men with whom relations weren't always friendly—Ed Koch and Rudy Giuliani—had appeared before them and hear them say they weren't satisfied by everything they heard but they respected the Mayors for showing up and offering responses to their complaints. Beyond that, issues were raised at the town halls that Mayors often weren't familiar with, and they deputized aides—from media

spokespersons to agency heads—to get the answers and get back to those who had broached them.

The risk in holding such events is that a Mayor can find himself under siege if the audience includes a sizable segment of people opposed to a particular policy. Where Mr. Koch and Mr. Giuliani in particular were inclined to respond to heckling with the brashness that was a key feature of their personalities, Mr. de Blasio is less fond of that kind of verbal combat and unaccustomed to engaging in it, presenting the possibility that either he would come off wimpy in not responding forcefully or come on too strong and have it backfire. But one of the challenges for any Mayor lies in the fact that you can't control every moment of your tenure, and a willingness to step outside the cocoon and assert yourself in the face of hostility can be defining in both good ways and bad.

The accusations of Mr. de Blasio having a crisis-management style of governing dovetail with the sense that until recently he has been too focused on building a national following at the expense of getting the city under control. This has been true even on issues where he had an inherent interest and that offered the added bonus of allowing him to fix a problem created by his predecessor.

Throwing Money At Buses

Early in his final year in office, Mayor Bloomberg used a court ruling as a pretext for eliminating the Employee Protection Provision from the contracts between school-bus companies and the union representing drivers and escorts. Without this clause that preserved basic compensation and seniority rights even if another company took over a school-bus route, the operators were free to reduce compensation to as little as they believed they could get away with and able to hire off the street if current employees balked at accepting the cuts in wages and benefits.

A month-long strike ensued, with labor advocates saying Mr. Bloomberg had engaged in a form of union-busting. The walkout ended after a petition was signed by all the Democratic candidates for Mayor that year—including Mr. de Blasio—saying that if elected in November, they would consider restoring the EPP.

When legislation introduced in Albany to permit that failed to move, Mr. de Blasio and the City Council 15 months ago authorized a \$42-million allocation to bus-company owners to bring wages and benefits up to the levels where they had been before Mr. Bloomberg opened the door to the drastic cuts. Complaints still persist from dissidents within Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 that some of the larger bus companies have failed to use the money for that purpose.

It's not clear why Mr. de Blasio hasn't pressed the issue, except that it has gotten virtually no media coverage beyond this newspaper. He is not likely to find himself under siege from his least-favorite media tormentor, The Post, on behalf of a group of mostly minority employees, and

probably not from The Times either, which means the issue could languish for the rest of his term.

Also Slow on HA

Even when an agency is a bit more in the public eye, his administration's response has often been sluggish. Daily News investigative reporter Greg Smith has churned out a steady string of pieces regarding the Housing Authority's long delays in providing everything from apartment repairs to the replacement of light bulbs in the hallways and stairwells of the developments, which may have played a role in the fatal shooting a year ago of an innocent man going down a dimly lit Brooklyn project stairwell by a cop who's now under indictment.

City Comptroller Scott Stringer has also found ample material in a series of audits of the HA, the most recent one Dec. 15 finding that more than three years after Hurricane Sandy caused major damage to buildings that housed 80,000 tenants, the agency still had major shortcomings when it came to dealing with potential weather-created emergencies.

An HA spokeswoman responded that Mr. Stringer had made a political decision to base his audit on findings that only went as far as February 2015, therefore not covering the time later in the spring when crucial improvements were made in emergency-response capabilities.

Judge Whacks HA on Mold

But even as that back-and-forth took place, U.S. District Judge William Pauley was chastising the HA for its failure to correct moldy conditions in more than 300 city developments—a problem made worse by the damage done by Hurricane Sandy—and appointed a special master to assure speedier compliance with a consent agreement reached in 2013, Mr. Bloomberg's last year in office.

The latter gentleman tended to treat the HA as a kind of step-child—it is a public-development corporation rather than a city agency, although all four of its board members are mayoral appointees. Mr. Bloomberg when asked about criticisms of its operations tended to point out that much of the HA's funding had traditionally come from the Federal Government, which began paring back its investment in public housing nationwide under President Ronald Reagan, and that the city simply couldn't make up the difference.

Residents of the developments are part of Mr. de Blasio's prime constituency, and he's taken a greater interest in fixing its problems, but with mixed results. Judge Pauley found that in addition to delays in dealing with the mold, repairs failed to address some of the underlying causes of it, which had led to recurrences of mold in as much as 41 percent of the cases where it had supposedly been abated.

'Infighting is Deafening'

Mr. Floyd said the stinging rebuke by Judge Pauley—who unlike Mr. Stringer has no political motive for making a case against Mr. de Blasio—was telling. So were the recent personnel defections, he contended, saying, “The infighting in his administration is deafening. The Deputy Mayor for Homeless Services is gone, now so is the Homeless Services Commissioner; how many more people are we going to see leaving in the first quarter of the new year?”

The Local 237 leader, who represents most HA workers as well as School Safety Agents, said it troubled him that “crime in NYCHA is at an all-time high” even though it has declined citywide, with the exception of a 5-percent uptick in murders. He is also concerned about a plan the HA issued in May that included the possibility of selling off unused or underused property that could become part of Mr. de Blasio’s affordable-housing program.

“I do not want to see NYCHA sacrificed to deliver on the Mayor’s promise of affordable housing,” Mr. Floyd said.

It has sometimes seemed like the unquestionable successes of the administration can be attributed to strong appointments of experienced agency heads who had no trouble getting the Mayor’s ear. That can be seen in the success of pre-kindergarten expansion piloted by Deputy Mayor Richard Beury; the long-overdue labor contracts left behind by Mr. Bloomberg resolved through the skills of Labor Commissioner Bob Linn and Budget Director Dean Fuleihan in upholding long traditions of pattern settlements and retroactivity while structuring the deals to minimize the financial hit on the city, and Police Commissioner Bill Bratton’s managing to keep the crime rate low even as the NYPD further scaled back stop-and-frisks to levels that might have seemed to put a strain on that trend.

Road-Trip Follies

But that’s the tricky thing about running the city: significant achievements in a few key agencies are no balm against the problems that can crop up elsewhere in municipal government. It was why it baffled so many people who pay attention to government when the Mayor, almost immediately after taking the oath of office, began traveling to other states to expand his profile as a paragon of progressivism, and didn’t seem the least bit deterred when his campaigning last year for Democratic candidates for State Senate seats outside the city seemed to have actually hurt their chances.

Whether his long-term goal was to become a candidate for national office or merely to be recognized as a prime spokesman for an urban agenda, his grand visions seemed to have blinded him to the fact that unless he could prove to have the city as well under control as could reasonably be expected, he was unlikely to build a following beyond those who are ideologically in sync with him. Mr. Koch’s line about Mayors being blamed if a sparrow falls in the city has

enough truth to it that it's inevitable that those who hold the job will sometimes chug-a-lug the self-pity that comes with feeling underappreciated.

But the best remedy available for Mr. de Blasio is to hunker down and get to work on mastering all the aspects of his job, and not worry that if he spends too much time listening to his critics among the voters, their doubts will prove contagious among his supporters. Given that his performance ratings have dipped below 45 percent in recent polls and fewer than one in three white voters approve of the job he's doing, concern about losing ground is beside the point, which is that he needs to gain ground to feel reasonably confident that he can win another term in less than 23 months.

Taking It to the Street

Two days after announcing Mr. Taylor's resignation—pressed on why, if it was voluntary, the Commissioner wasn't there, the Mayor said snippily, "I'm giving this press conference"—and stating that the city was launching a 90-day review of homeless operations, Mr. de Blasio abruptly told an Association for a Better New York breakfast that he was creating street-action teams to get emergency assistance to the people who needed it most.

They will involve 60 field staff and analysts who will do a daily canvass of every block in Manhattan from Canal St. to 145th St. and also look to determine where the problem of homeless living on the streets is most prevalent in the other boroughs. Overall homeless outreach staff will grow from 175 to approximately 312, Mr. de Blasio said, and the Police Department will redeploy 40 officers to its 70-cop Homeless Outreach Unit to deal with encampments.

The moves were startlingly quick for an administration not known for alacrity. Then again, the steady drumbeat of negative Post front pages on the issue—the paper's headline after the announcement Mr. Taylor was leaving was "Bumshell," with smaller type declaring, "Mayor finally discovers crisis"—may have convinced him it was time to get moving. There was no sense waiting for his other prime demon, Governor Cuomo, to serve up his solution to the situation Jan. 13 as part of his State of the State address. Or, for that matter, for the Post to take a page from its greatest-hits album and substitute his first name for that of his old boss in the classic 1990 headline "Dave, Do Something!"

Spurred 'Safe Streets'

That became the catalyst for the "Safe Streets, Safe City" program, using a tax hike to fund the hiring of an additional 5,000 cops to bring down a murder rate that would climb to a record 2,245 by year's end. The program, which was strongly supported throughout the city, briefly quieted Mr. Dinkins's critics and was the start of a steady reduction in crime that has continued now for a

quarter-century.

There are two caveats that might be of some concern to Mr. de Blasio.

One is that there won't necessarily be the same level of political support for dealing with the homeless problem that there was for coping with crime in a city that seemed under siege in some areas, including the subways.

The other is that, whatever credit Mr. Dinkins got for implementing the program, it wasn't enough for him to win re-election three years later.

But win or lose, overcoming the nagging about whether he's in over his head and hasn't been sufficiently diligent or respectful about his job ought to be worth something to Mr. de Blasio.