

Analysts Proposed Sabbaticals

OMB Just Dropped the Ball

By ROBERT J. CROGHAN

There are times when even a certified city analyst has trouble understanding what is going on in New York City government.

During most of 1990 we were all made aware of an impending city fiscal crisis. The fiscal crisis was due to a combination of factors, all of which could have been seen coming and most of which began to arrive during the closing year of the Koch administration.

Boom and Bust

One factor, implicit in our economic system since the early days of our nation, is the tendency toward a continual cycle of boom and bust. Ed Koch's mayoralty caught the cycle on the rise. Wall Street enjoyed prosperity until 1987, real estate boomed and a prospering national economy left Koch facing budget surpluses during each of his early years in office.

As the wheel turned, however, a recession came upon us. Wall Street stumbled, the bottom fell out of the real estate market and Ed Koch left to take up his new role as a media columnist.

As a city analyst, I would have preferred to have had Ed Koch retire some of the city debt when times were good, but this did not happen. Thus, when times became bad, there was no financial cushion and the city, for the second time in 16 years, faced layoffs, increased taxes and a frightened municipal bond market.

Mayor Dinkins came upon the scene with great hopes and plans, but very little money to accomplish his goals.

The Organization of Staff Analysts began, along with other municipal unions, to seek ways to painlessly downsize city expenditures. OSA, without hesitation, endorsed proposals for incentive retirements, for reduced contracting-out and, with some hesitation, endorsed proposals for some very limited tax increases.

Some Wanted a Year Off

Tax increases are, however, a long-term dead end. A more equitable sharing of the tax burdens is clearly needed, but simply raising taxes is counter-productive.

OSA also endorsed one cost-saving measure which we felt was most important. The Organization of Staff Analysts surveyed its membership and learned that five to seven percent of our members wanted a year off.

The members involved did not expect to be paid for their year off. They did expect to pay for their own health insurance. They did, of course, expect to have a job waiting for them when the year was up, but not necessarily the same position as the one they left.

OSA offered, to the City of New York, to exchange "sabbaticals" for layoffs. The

numbers worked out rather neatly. In 1991, the city proposed to lay off four percent of our members, and OSA's survey showed that well over four percent of the members wanted a year off in any case.

Also Long-Term Idea

Moreover, the OSA survey learned that the same percentage would be anxious to take a year off one year later, so that the solution need not be a short-term one but rather a long-term method of reducing fiscal outlay.

Our belief was that the city would benefit in two ways from permitting one-year, voluntary leaves of absence.

Many of our members would like to take a year off for a variety of reasons. The reasons include ill or troubled family members, a desire to try a different field or

details at any time, day, night or weekends. We bent over backwards seeking to overcome any legitimate or even half-way legitimate objections of the agencies or OMB. We apparently were wasting our time with OMB.

The closest we came to learning OMB's objections was when the OMB representative raised one most curious objection. He stated that OMB statistically counted an employee on leave as being a part of "headcount." Since an employee on leave was on headcount, replacing that person with a laid-off worker would increase the headcount. This could look bad in the newspapers.

Five weeks into the negotiation process we had learned a single reason why OMB was resisting our plan and their reason made no sense.

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to continue education, and job frustration or simply a desire to travel the world.

Whatever their reasons, many of our members would like to go off for a year and return to the job refreshed and renewed a year later. Our city would benefit.

Meanwhile, other members, financially unable to sustain a loss of their income for a year, were facing layoffs. The city could avoid this.

Voluntary Furlough

The members of the Organization of Staff Analysts supported this plan with their own sacrificed salaries. OSA members voted, by mail ballot, to accept a voluntary, two-day unpaid furlough. The money saved by the unpaid furloughs would be used to pay members targeted for layoff or demotion until the mechanism was set up to exchange sabbaticals for layoffs.

It was a generous impulse which led our members to sacrifice their own income to assist their brothers and sisters and to buy the city the time needed to find a better way to save money without hurting people.

It did not work. The first part of the plan did work, and worked well.

The agencies (Sanitation and especially the Human Resources Administration) were cooperative and restored our members to work by the due date of Sept. 23, 1991. The Office of Labor Relations then devoted many hours of effort to attempt to work out the details of sabbaticals in exchange for layoffs with the agencies and the Office of Management and Budget.

OMB stonewalled us. OSA had made it clear that we would meet to work out

Since New York City is self-insured in regard to unemployment insurance benefits, each laid-off analyst costs \$280 a week to N.Y.C. An analyst on sabbatical costs the city nothing. Thus, refusing our plan would cost the city money and accepting it would save money.

Hard to Believe

It is very hard for analysts to believe that OMB could turn down a way to save money in order to preserve a statistically neat "headcount." After all, New York City has a fiscal crisis, not a statistical crisis.

Naturally, the analysts of OSA deeply resent OMB's actions since it left our members vulnerable to being again laid off on Nov. 15, 1991 after all our sacrifices and good-faith negotiations. Still, the primary emotion felt is puzzlement.

OMB's job, as we see it, is to alleviate the fiscal crisis, not to worsen it. They seem to have done the opposite each chance they got and we don't know why.

As matters worked out, we only had to give up one day, 75 percent of our returned analysts retained their jobs after the date of their expected termination, and thus our members actions on behalf of their fellow members worked out fairly well. A dozen more families will have a happy Christmas season than would have occurred otherwise.

But why is OMB so unresponsive and, as far as we can tell, impractical? We really don't know.

Mr. Croghan is chairman of the 1,800-member Organization of Staff Analysts/Related Titles.

The Chief
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