

New York City Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn
Crain's New York Business Breakfast

Remarks as delivered
April 18, 2006

First I'd like to thank Crain's for hosting this breakfast. I want to thank Alaire Townsend and Greg David for inviting me here this morning. And I want to thank Frankie Edozian who, for those of you who don't know, is by far the best dressed political reporter down at City Hall...Frankie, with that compliment...please go easy on me today.

Too often in government we fall into a habit...a pattern... of doing things a certain way simply because – we're told – that's the way they're always done.

This is true in terms of the relationship between the Mayor the Council...between the Council and lobbyists...and to some degree between the Council and the constituents who elect us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson famously said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

Today, I want to talk about ending foolish consistencies that are limiting the effectiveness of the City Council...that are holding us back from serving our constituents as well as they deserve to be served.

I believe that we have an unprecedented opportunity right now to fundamentally change these relationships ...and become a better, more professional City Council.

Why now?

First, we are not facing a major crisis. The City is going in the right direction...crime is down...jobs are up...and we are running a budget surplus.

That means we can focus on those things that are important but not immediate...ideas and reforms that will help us in the long run but are often overlooked during tough times.

Second, there is a new sense of cooperation between the Council and the Mayor. We are working well with this Administration and have already implemented measures that we would not have been able to in years past because they would have devolved into chest thumping or games of "gotcha."

Third, the desire for reform – in Washington, in Albany and in New York City is strong. People want a government that answers to them and that works effectively and efficiently...independence and competence are in demand.

And fourth, new technology is allowing us to better serve our constituents. CompStat and 311 are excellent examples of this.

So long as we don't bask in the warmth of recovery, as President John Kennedy once said, we have an opportunity to make real changes.

If we are not complacent, we can alter the status quo and make government work better for the people we serve.

The single most important reform we can undertake is to fix our broken budget process.

Some of you have heard me say this before...as recently as two weeks ago at the Council budget response.

We must end the budget dance... so that we can end the culture of lobbying at City Hall and bring real accountability to government.

For those of you who don't know this dance...it goes like this:

The Mayor leads with an executive budget and proposed cuts – knowing and expecting the Council to restore funding for libraries, cultural institutions and the like.

The Council plays its pre-determined role of proposing these restorations and then negotiating with the Mayor and his representatives.

The list of cuts changes a bit from one year to the next and the amount swings with the City's economic fortunes. But the roles and the steps are the same year after year after year.

In a City budget of more than \$50 billion, we end up dancing over a couple of hundred million dollars – less than ½ of 1 percent of expenditures.

Needless to say, we are not having serious debates about the spending priorities of the City or effective oversight of the budget.

The City Charter, when it was rewritten in 1989, envisioned something very different.

The Charter Revision Commission envisioned an expense budget in which every agency budget is broken out by particular program, purpose or activity, accompanied by statements of the goals each was designed to accomplish and the amount of funds allocated. The Administration was supposed to provide the City Council with explanations of the impact a proposed level of funding would have on those individual programs.

But that has never happened. The budget process today is virtually identical to the one the 1989 commission sought to reform.

For the most part, agency budgets are overly broad and don't detail individual programs.

In many agencies, all personnel funding is stuffed into a single budget line – instead of being broken out into individual units of appropriation. The descriptions of programmatic objectives are often nothing more than a list of the programs themselves.

When it comes to capital spending --- \$10 billion annually – the problem is even more pronounced. Currently, the Council gets no information from the executive on capital cost overruns and under-runs, capital project timelines and new projects within the capital plan.

In fact, the only thing we look at in the capital budget are the programs that we deliver for our local districts.

This lack of oversight has real life consequences and costs taxpayers money.

Take for example the City's water tunnels that bring our water supply from upstate reservoirs. Fixing and completing these tunnels is costing us billions...it is one of the largest public works projects in the history of the City. Yet we have no idea if it's coming in on-budget or over-budget...late or on time. And, there is no oversight whatsoever on the contractors who are building the tunnels.

We are governing by the honor system...a scary notion indeed.

Or take the infamous bunker for the Office of Emergency Management. The Mayor put this project into the capital budget in mid-year without the council ever knowing about it...no oversight which meant no one raised the obvious question – should this bunker go into a building that had been attacked once before.

Now, this happened under Mayor Giuliani – so I'm not sure he would have listened to us anyway – but at least we would have raised the right questions.

So there's no transparency, no way for us to tell exactly how taxpayer dollars are being spent, and no way to ensure that we're doing all we can to meet New Yorkers current needs.

If agency budgets and the capital budget were presented in the way the charter mandates, the debate could truly be one about priorities. And Council committees could do a better job of oversight and more effectively evaluate programs throughout the year. Instead, we just go back to the same old budget dance.

I have spoken to the Mayor and to my colleagues and I'm confident that we're going to reform the process so that we can start evaluating every program and base funding

decisions on these criteria:

- Does the program fill a real need?
- Is it serving people effectively?
- Is there better way to help New Yorkers?
- Has the program already served its purpose?
- Given the City's fiscal situation and the array of competing priorities, can we still afford the program? And at what level?

If a program does not fit these criteria they should be reformed or cut.

This is taxpayer money we are talking about...this is the people's money and we need to make sure that it is being spent the right way... not based on who has the most connected lobbyist...but based on if the program truly works...it's that simple.

To truly end the influence of lobbyists down at City Hall, we need fundamental lobbying reform.

We need to change the relationship between lobbyists and City government so that the next Jack Abramoff knows that he's not welcome here.

I am pleased to say that we are well on our way to achieving this goal.

In February, Mayor Bloomberg and I announced a series of steps to tighten restrictions on lobbyists and reduce their power within City government.

Under our plan we will no longer match lobbyists' contributions with public funds... We will ban all gifts from lobbyists to city officials...create a mandatory electronic filing system for lobbyists...require full lobbyist disclosure of all fundraising and consulting activity...and, we will strengthen enforcement and penalties for violations of lobbying law.

These are common sense reforms that have never been implemented because there's never been the will...because it's the way it's always been done.

We must change this – and I am confident that we will pass these measures into law this Spring.

We must change this because we need the people to know that we answer to them...and them alone.

That when they have a need, that need will be filled...not thwarted by a special interest with deep pockets.

It is our job to make sure that no one stands in between ourselves and the people we serve

The City Council is the People's House...the 51 members of the Council know better than anyone the needs and problems that face their communities and neighborhoods.

We are the portals into government for millions of New Yorkers.

Unfortunately, we are 51 separate portals that too often do not communicate effectively with one another about the problems that we see and hear about in our districts.

In some ways, this is similar to the way the City dealt with crime before CompStat. We would react to problems within precincts – and sometimes within boroughs – but without looking at larger patterns.

With the advent of CompStat we could look across the City – and in local areas – to find places where specific crimes are going up or down so that we could adjust police presence accordingly.

A new Council initiative – CouncilStat – will apply this principle to the constituent complaints that we get every day.

By creating a central constituent complaint database we will be able to see problem patterns across Council lines and across the City.

For example take something as simple as stop signs. Many of us hear complaints about the need for more stop signs in our districts. If we knew that this was a problem across the City or in certain sections of it, we could work with the Department of Transportation on a new strategy for deployment. Otherwise we are dealing willy nilly with a problem that may need a citywide solution.

Or take playgrounds. Parents complain regularly about upkeep and the need for repairs at local playgrounds. These are either isolated problems or systemic ones...right now we have no way of knowing.

With CouncilStat we will be able to identify the what, where and when of a problem, and we will be able to correct it...either legislatively, through oversight hearings or through the budget.

The problems that our constituents are calling us about – from the mundane to the life altering – are exactly the issues that we should be addressing...Because while it is fine to propose legislation based on stories we read in the newspapers – and Frankie, trust me, you give us a lot of great ideas – this is not the most efficient or reliable way to discover our constituents' needs.

We are by definition the body closest to the people...we must improve the manner in which we listen to them and analyze their problems.

By using new technologies – and by not being satisfied with the status quo – we can serve the people better and be a more effective City Council.

Yes, I am gratified at how much we've accomplished for the City – on reducing crime, increasing jobs and balancing the budget responsibly, for example.

But there is a world of difference between gratified and satisfied.

This is our opportunity to end Emerson's foolish consistencies.

From stopping the budget dance, to lobbying reform, to allowing Council members to communicate with one another about local concerns.

We can change the way we do business at City Hall...and we can serve our constituents better.

That is my commitment.

Thank you.