

OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC ADVOCATE

FEBRUARY 2008

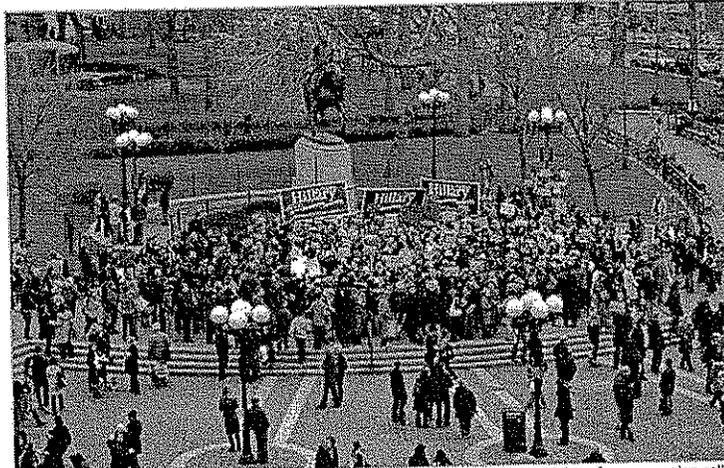
CLIPS

The New York Times

Chants of 'Madame President' in Union Square

By KATE HAMMER

2/2/08



Several hundred supporters of Hillary Rodham Clinton joined several local politicians for a campaign rally at Union Square on Saturday afternoon. (Photo: Cary Conover for The New York Times)

**PRIMARY
JOURNAL**



Several hundred supporters of Hillary Rodham Clinton gathered today in Union Square for a "Stand Up for Hillary" rally.

They listened to speeches by the actress Fran Drescher of "The Nanny" and several local politicians, including Geraldine A. Ferraro, the 1984 Democratic nominee for vice president; Marty Markowitz, the Brooklyn borough president; Representatives Carolyn B. Maloney of Manhattan and Anthony D. Weiner of Queens, and Christine C. Quinn, the City Council speaker.

"We want to give the rest of the country what we have had in New York for eight years — smart, efficient, dynamic leadership," said Ms. Quinn, a Manhattan Democrat, referring to Mrs. Clinton's years in the United States Senate.

In between speeches supporters chanted "Madame President" and "Hillary!"

In another corner of the park, a small group of nearly a dozen Barack Obama supporters also rallied. Shortly afterward, a shouting match between a Clinton supporter and an Obama supporter drew a crowd but the pair were quickly separated by other rally-goers.

Shortly after, Ms. Ferraro and Ms. Quinn joined Representative Nydia M. Velázquez and Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum paid a visit to a Clinton campaign phone bank based in the Lower Manhattan headquarters of the United Federation of Teachers.

"I've been waiting for eight long years for this moment," Ms. Velázquez said, eliciting laughter from a room filled with dozens of teachers volunteering for the phone bank — and another dozen reporters.

Ms. Velázquez's phone campaign seemed to get off to a slow start, most of the numbers she dialed didn't answer. But shortly after she posed for a picture with an admirer, she got a bite.

"Hello, this is Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez," she said into the telephone receiver. And the game was afoot.

Read more Primary Journal blog entries from the New York region.

The NEW YORK Sun

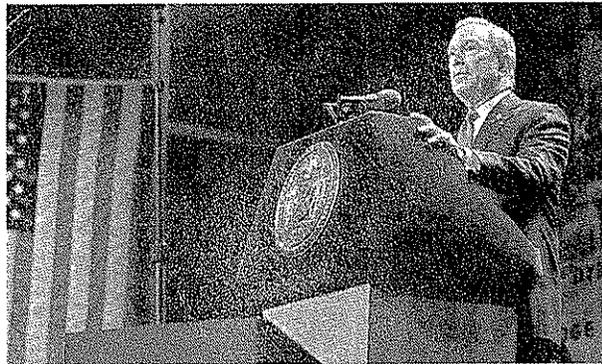
LETTERS

'Mayor Boosts Career Schools, Standards for Eighth-Graders'

At the Mayor's State of the City address, I was thrilled to hear that his administration plans to expand our career and technical education programs [New York, "Mayor Boosts Career Schools, Standards for Eighth-Graders," January 18, 2008].

With 200,000 disconnected youths, neither in school nor employed, New York City desperately needs more opportunities for our young people.

The Mayor's initiative can only be successful, however, if Career and Technical Education is aligned with indus-



KONRAD FIEDLER

MAYOR BLOOMBERG AT STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

tries most in need of educated workers.

Results of a 2006 survey conducted by my office indicate that our current CTE program is preparing too few students for careers in

health services, an industry estimated to have 7,600 job openings annually.

With city CTE programs producing enough graduates to fill only 2% of health services jobs available, there

clearly is room for improvement.

I strongly urge Mayor Bloomberg to use the CTE expansion plan as an opportunity to fill the gap.

BETSY GOTBAUM
Public Advocate
New York, N.Y.

Please address letters intended for publication to the Editor of *The New York Sun*.

Letters may be sent by e-mail to editor@nysun.com, by facsimile to 212-608-7348, or post to 105 Chambers Street, New York City 10007. Please include a return address and daytime telephone number. Letters may be edited.

FEB 3, 2008



Gotham Gazette

New York City News and Policy

Language Barriers at the Drugstore
by Courtney Gross
04 Feb 2008

When Catalina Martinez of Ridgewood walks into a pharmacy to get a prescription, the task may not be as easy as it seems.

Beyond the long lines and their physician's unintelligible handwriting, Martinez, like thousands of other New Yorkers, faces a seemingly insurmountable wall at their local drugstore: a language barrier.

"When I go to the pharmacy, I see that the bottles are in English and I want to know what it says on the bottles," said Martínez, who was interviewed through a translator. "So many times I leave the pharmacy without knowing what it is saying. That's scary for me."

According to immigrant and health care advocates, the majority of pharmacies, particularly in the outer boroughs, do not provide translation services to their customers. This leaves thousands of New Yorkers with limited proficiency in English to fend for themselves. Labels remain untranslated, so crucial instructions from the pharmacist may be incomprehensible.

Unlike hospitals, which, under state regulations, must provide translators, pharmacies are under no such requirement. That, some city leaders say, may soon change.

Where Regulations Stand

For the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers who do not know English, the local pharmacy and its rows of bottles with labels reading Zolof or Ambien can be baffling. With Americans increasingly reliant upon prescriptions, advocates say an inaccurate translation -- or none at all -- can pose a significant danger.

The 2000 Census showed that nearly half of New York City households speak a language other than English, and one out of four New Yorkers do not speak English at all. That leaves 25 percent of the city's population scrounging for health care in their own language or care at a facility offering translation services.

While the state approved regulations in 2006 that set out language requirements for hospitals, pharmacies were overlooked, said some advocates. According to a recent report by the New York Academy of Medicine, two thirds of city pharmacies do not translate prescription labels, despite the fact that 88 percent said they served limited English proficiency patients daily.

A report released late last year by the advocacy groups New York Lawyers for the Public Interest and Make the Road by Walking details nearly a dozen anecdotes from Brooklyn and Queens residents who do not speak English.

Catalina Martinez is one of them. She suffers from gastritis and has a 14-year-old son prone to allergies, forcing her to visit the pharmacy often. A native of Mexico who has lived in Ridgewood for a decade, Martinez sometimes stops strangers on the street, hoping to get her prescriptions translated since the pharmacies she frequents do not provide language assistance. Sometimes, she said, she will not give her son medication for fear of administering it incorrectly.

"Maybe I have to give him this much medicine, sometimes I have to give less," said the 49-year-old. "Sometimes I won't even give it to my son because I won't know how to do it."

Martinez's apprehension is shared by many immigrants, said Nisha Agarwal, a staff attorney with New York Lawyers for the Public Interest. To address this, the lawyers group, along with City

Councilmember Eric Gioia and Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum, is drafting legislation that would require translation services be provided at all city pharmacies.

"Giving New Yorkers access to the information they need starts with simple, common sense steps, like providing translation services and extra medical instruction for those with limited English proficiency who are filling prescriptions," said Gotbaum in a prepared statement. "Our proposed legislation will help break down the barriers many currently face when seeking health care and ensure that no New Yorker is left guessing when it comes to questions about their medication."

Other council members have also expressed support for the measure. "Although I appreciate the efforts already taken by a number of pharmacies to help their customers read their prescription label in a more familiar language, these businesses still have more work to do," said Councilmember Joel Rivera, chair of the Health Committee, in an e-mailed statement. "People should not have to guess how to administer their medicine just because they can't read the directions. Clearly the consequences can be devastating. The translate of drug labels by pharmacies is not only a good idea, it is the right thing to do."

What Advocates Want

Advocates, like Agarwal, believe the city's existing human rights law, which prohibits discrimination based on race or ethnicity in public places, requires pharmacies to translate. So far, though, pharmacists do not interpret the law that way.

Both New York Lawyers for Public Interest and Make the Road by Walking filed a formal complaint with the state attorney general's office, claiming 16 pharmacies in Queens and Brooklyn routinely failed to translate drug labels or provide instruction to non-English speakers, thus violating their statutory duty. That complaint is pending, said Agarwal.

They hope the legislation currently being drafted will replicate what the state required from hospitals in 2006, making language access a requirement of quality health care. Agarwal said the legislation should be introduced in the coming weeks.

The specific standards for pharmacies would strengthen the current requirements under the human rights law, said Theo Oshiro, the director of health advocacy at Make the Road by Walking.

Oshiro said his group has already seen some success. Pharmacies in Bushwick, for example, stepped up their language education campaigns with signs announcing translation services behind some counters.

"I guess there has been spotty results; there has not been a whole chain setting out clear guidelines," said Oshiro. "We're still looking for that kind of sweeping solution, not only in Bushwick and in Woodside."

City officials spearheading the legislation say the proposal would simply turn an assumed right into an explicit one. Business leaders, however, disagree.

Business Barriers

James Detura owns his own pharmacy in the South Bronx where the population is predominantly Spanish speaking. Detura, who is president of the New York City Pharmacists Society, said a translation mandate would be catastrophic. It is already difficult to find any pharmacist -- due to a nationwide shortage of pharmacists -- let alone a bilingual ones, he said.

For communities that do not have one or two dominant languages, but three, four or even five, it could be next to impossible to meet strict language access guidelines. "What about a pharmacy that is in certain area of New York City when you've got Spanish and Russian?" asked Detura. "What do you do in a case like that? Are you going to have a separate pharmacist for each one?" There are enough pharmacies in the city, especially locally owned businesses that cater to certain

Detura also fears inaccurate translations. He said it may be easy to translate "one pill a day," but more complicated instructions may not be as readily interpreted -- especially if there are no services available for a local pharmacist to double-check a phoned-in translation.

But advocates said there are plenty of accurate resources for a local pharmacist, such as subscriber hotlines that can translate at the click of a dial. Oshiro also said they were not looking to require bilingual pharmacists.

Like Detura, others question whether the legislation would put an unreasonable burden on small, independent pharmacists. In response, Oshiro said the smaller pharmacies already do a better job accommodating immigrant populations' needs.

Instead, advocates argue that it is larger chains, such as Duane Reade and Rite Aid that fail to translate. Even if the big chains have the ability to provide the service (some have telephone translation networks or bilingual staff), they often do not advertise it to their customers.

A Bilingual Call

While many of the details must still be worked out, immigrant and health care advocates said they are keeping both business and health interests in mind. The idea is to save people's lives, or at the very least prevent confusion and sickness.

Convinced she became ill after incorrectly taking medication with a label she couldn't understand, Martinez said she cannot, nor can she give her son, medication with an easy mind.

If pharmacies cannot provide bilingual or trilingual employees, they should at least provide labels in other languages, Martinez said. That way, she added, she and thousands of other New Yorkers can take their medication with confidence.

Maia Szalavitz is author, with Dr. Joseph Volpicelli, of "Recovery Options: The Complete Guide: How You and Your Loved Ones Can Understand and Treat Alcohol and Other Drug Problems." She writes frequently on health, science and public policy for the New York Times, New York Magazine, the Village Voice, and other publications.

DAILY NEWS



February 7, 2008

Big Battle Brewing Over City, State Education Cuts

A reader with labor ties called in to report a strategy meeting underway right now at the SEIU/32BJ HQ on Sixth Avenue at which an unusually broad coalition of labor leaders and elected officials - both legislators and Council members - are plotting a major fight against the city and state education funding cuts.

The meeting is being hosted by AQE, EdPAC, ACORN and UFT, and the attendance list reads like a who's-who of Democratic politics. There are approximately 150 people present, including 43 state lawmakers who showed up in person and didn't merely send a staffer to take notes.

Also on hand are: WFP Executive Director Dan Cantor, UFT President Randi Weingarten, Ernie Logan of the principals union, 32BJ President Mike Fishman, UNITE-HERE Executive Vice President Peter Ward, CLC Executive Director Ed Ott, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum and Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer.

Just to name a few.

The immediate focus, according to my source, is Mayor Bloomberg's surprise mid-year budget cut of 1.75 percent (\$180 million), since it's already underway and has led to the demise of test preparation classes and after-school programs.

Nothing but 'test-prep factories' Public advocate rails against excessive testing at local public schools

By Michele De Meglio

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum is renewing her fight against the city Department of Education's emphasis on standardized testing and winning the support of frustrated parents. Calling public schools "test-prep factories," Gotbaum said, "Parents and educators are for

standards but they are against excessive testing at the expense of education programs like art, history and geography." Brooklyn parents also asserted that public schools are spending so much time "teaching for the test" that they're unable to focus on other subjects like art and music.

"There's a place for testing. Unfortunately, it seems that that is now becoming the only way of evaluating students," explained Christopher Spinelli, president of District 22's Community Education Council (CEC). "We just went through the ELAs [English Language Arts exams]

this week and now most schools are going to shut down English Language Arts and ramp up math," Spinelli continued. "That's not a way to learn." Gotbaum has taken issue with the number of tests students take a year. In some grades, 12 tests are taken each year, the majority of which are

periodic assessment exams the DOE administrators to see if students are mastering the curriculum. A spokesperson for the DOE said the assessment exams, which are given five times a year in reading and math, allow teachers to determine which topics students require more work in and how to tailor instruction to suit their needs.

"The results of these periodic assessments within a few days of giving them are online for teachers to look at," Andrew Jacob explained. "You can do that sort of analysis that would take a long, long time to do by hand on your own."

Assessment exams do not play a role in students' grades but are factored into schools' annual report cards, called progress reports. Jacob said there is no department policy preventing schools from "teaching for the test" by focusing on test preparation, but noted that schools Chancellor Joel Klein has discouraged the

periodic assessment exams the DOE administrators to see if students are mastering the curriculum. A spokesperson for the DOE said the assessment exams, which are given five times a year in reading and math, allow teachers to determine which topics students require more work in and how to tailor instruction to suit their needs.



Photo by Bob Hacken
Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum.

practice. "I think everyone would agree that's not engaging instruction for the students," Jacob said. "The ELA test is a reading test. No amount of learning how to bubble in bubble sheets is going to help a student pass who can't read."

"The best preparation for the tests is engaging and effective teaching," he continued. "If students mastered all the skills that are going to be on the test, they're going to do well on the test."

The Sun

State Raises Consequences For Failing Schools

BY Staff Reporter of the Sun

February 7, 2008

URL: <http://www.nysun.com/article/70931>

New York State is raising the consequences for schools placed on its failure list, ordering that some be shut down rather than sit on the list.

The failure designation is part of the state's compliance with the federal No Child Left Behind law and is determined by schools' showings on state standardized tests.

In the past, schools placed on the list have faced a sliding scale of consequences that grow the longer they spend on it. Working on their own, districts have closed 60 failing schools since the list was first used in 1998.

This year, working with the districts, the state is shutting down some newly designated failing schools as well as some that were already on the list.

Five New York City schools already on the list are being phased out, and four that would have been placed on it this year are being closed instead.

Six schools, most of them middle schools, are the city's new additions to the state's failing list. But the closures mean that this year's list is the shortest it has ever been for the city — with 32 failing schools, down from 58 in the 2002—2003 school year.

The president of the teachers union, Randi Weingarten, criticized the new measures, saying, "We believe that closing schools should be the last resort, not a first step."

The city's public advocate, Betsy Gotbaum, said schools should be given a chance to make improvements before they are shut down.

A Department of Education spokesman, Andrew Jacob, said the small size of New York City's list demonstrates progress.

The Sun

School Budget Cuts Prompt Calls for Sliced Bureaucracy

By **ELIZABETH GREEN**
Staff Reporter of the Sun

Saying Mayor Bloomberg's budget proposal would unfairly harm schools, union leaders, advocates, elected officials, and principals are concocting alternative strategies for weathering the bad economy.

Some of the ideas that have been percolating were pitched at a rowdy meeting last night in Manhattan attended by about 150 people. The principals union president, Ernest Logan, and the teachers union president, Randi Weingarten, were among those demanding more belt-tightening at the central Department of Education, people who attended the meeting said.

The meeting was closed to reporters.

The department's bureaucracy is one area of concern among the critics. A report compiled by the City Council shows the number of people employed at central administration is rising, growing to 2,337 full-time employees in the

latest available figures, for November 2007, from 2,148 in July 2007.

A department called the Office of Accountability is an area of particular concern. An e-mail message dated January 9 announced 13 new hires at the office.

A copy of the message mailed to The New York Sun that hid its sender's identity included a handwritten note: "We thought there was a hiring freeze."

After obtaining the message, the city's public advocate, Betsy Gotbaum, mentioned the memo at the meeting last night, a source who attended said.

A Department of Education spokesman, Andrew Jacob, said none of the new hires on the city payroll are newly created positions, but merely filling vacancies.

Advocates and union leaders are also examining a number of multimillion-dollar no-bid contracts the Department of Education holds with outside companies.

One five-year contract, for \$80 million, is with the educational publishing company CTB McGraw Hill, which agreed to write new diagnostic tests called periodic assessments for grades 3

through 12.

The contract is costing the department \$30 million this year, Mr. Jacob said.

The contract is getting attention because high school principals haven't yet received a single assessment.

Speaking anonymously because they said they feared they would lose their jobs, several high school sources said they have been asking for the assessments every week for months.

Mr. Jacob said the assessments were initially scheduled to be released this month, and a Power Point presentation written in July of last year says the same thing.

But principals in the next few days will be told that the assessments will not be released until after February, and that only two will be given rather than three. Mr. Jacob said the change is a result of conversations with educators, who told the department February was not a good time to give a diagnostic test.

He said the department will save money from the change, but he could not say how much.

"We only pay for the assessments we actually administer," Mr. Jacob said.

A change in the number of assessments given in lower grades, to four from five, was listed as a budget savings of \$1 million in Mr. Bloomberg's budget. No changes in high school assessments were listed as a savings.

FEB 8, 2008

NYC Public School Parents

Independent voices of New York City public school parents

Wednesday, February 13, 2008

Public Advocate's Office Requests Data on Unannounced Scanning Program from DOE



A letter from Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum dated February 8, 2008 has been sent to Chancellor Klein expressing disapproval of the DOE's unannounced ("random") scanning program and requesting detailed information on the program's costs, impact on school attendance, and safety enhancement results. Ms. Gotbaum's letter argues that: *"This program was implemented without any meaningful public discussion and continues despite growing public concern over the disruption it causes. The DOE has provided little evidence of the program's effectiveness, and there is reason to believe it has done more harm than good."*

Ms. Gotbaum's letter continues by noting that *"...rather than deterring students from carrying weapons, unannounced scanning actually deters blameless students from attending school...."* She further states that parents who disagree or have complained about the scanning program *"have been denied a meaningful opportunity to provide their input,"* and later adds that excessive absences on the days schools are subjected to unannounced scanning are *"hardly an acceptable consequence of a program that purports to promote a school environment that is conducive to teaching and learning."*

The Public Advocate's requests for information from the DOE are specific and comprehensive, including:

- "-- A complete list of every school that has been subject to this program since it began;*
- The dates that scanning took place at each school;*
- A complete breakdown of confiscated and/or cataloged items from the inception of the program to the present including...weapons and other dangerous items...as well as cell phones, ipods, and other electronic devices;*
- The attendance rate at each school on the day(s) the unannounced scanning took place;*
- The attendance rates at each school the day before and the day after the scanning day(s);*
- The average attendance rate at each school where unannounced scanning took place;*
- A cost breakdown of the unannounced scanning program including...the number and cost of portable scanners; their maintenance costs; the personnel costs directly associated with scanning; the personnel costs associated with administration of the program and with other personnel who attempt to prevent children from leaving school grounds or hiding their belongings; and the cost of record-keeping, reporting, and program administration."*

Ms. Gotbaum's letter is a direct consequence of a posting on the NYC Public School Parents blog concerning the effect of random scanning at John Bowne High School on January 10 of this year. That posting, in turn, came about due to the past reporting of public school parents from Forest Hills, John Bowne, and Benjamin Cardozo high schools at the nyceducationnews Yahoo group (www.groups.yahoo.com/group/nyceducationnews). Many thanks to each of these parents for their timely news postings that enabled us to accumulate concrete information about the negative attendance effects of this DOE program. Thanks as well, of course, to Ms. Gotbaum and to Tomas Hunt in the Public Advocate's Office. We will hopefully have more to report in the coming weeks.

The New York Times

Bible Belt N.Y.C.?

2114108

By [The New York Times](#) City Room Blog

What we're looking at on the Web today...

For last-minute valentines, [an illustrated guide to Brooklyn's most and least romantic spots](#). [Brooklyn Skeptic]

Resolved: [greenstreets](#), with their neckdowns and bulbouts, are good for the city. [Streetsblog]

A flea market site in Palmyra, N.J., [sits on top of a former firing range](#) that might still contain live ammunition. So don't pull the pin out of that old grenade. [Antique Trader Blog]

The "[jail with retail](#)" that might have been at the Brooklyn House of Detention. [Curbed]

Making the rounds today, Charles E. Schumer, who is a Democratic superdelegate and still supports his fellow New York senator, Hillary Rodham Clinton, [predicts Democrats will come together in the end](#). Watch [the video](#). [The Caucus, The Politicker]

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum is demanding that the Department of Education [turn over detailed data about the unannounced searches at schools that lead to seizure of cellphones, iPods and the like](#). [NYC Public School Parents]

Barneys New York is rumored to be in the process of [signing a lease for a downtown outpost](#) in a building on West 13th Street between Ninth Avenue and Washington Street. [Racked]

Nobody can move into the multi-story addition to the Circle in the Square Theater [until the terraces are sawed down to 22 inches](#). [Curbed]

The city is more religious than the Bible Belt, [according to an analysis](#) by the Queens College sociologist Andrew A. Beveridge. [Gotham Gazette]

[A new home for Pies 'N Thighs?](#) [Gothamist]

[A computer model showing the relationships between development in Lower Manhattan and urban renewal, subways lines, commercial zones and more](#). [Flowing Data]



Gotham Gazette

New York City News and Policy

A Battle Brews Over Who Controls the Schools
by Gail Robinson
19 Feb 2008



Kelly J. Brownlee/Gotham Gazette

It is a tale of two systems.

In one, students in orderly classes eagerly learn language arts and math as teachers, equipped with the latest data, tailor the work to the children's needs. Teens flock to nurturing small schools that capture their interests, enabling them to earn a Regents diploma in four years as delighted parents hail the achievements of a system that finally puts children first.

In the other, arrogant Ivy League-educated lawyers ignore parents bewildered by constant bureaucratic reshuffling, convoluted admissions procedures for middle schools and draconian discipline. Students spend hours preparing for standardized tests, unable to experience art, music, physical education or the joy of real learning.

Which of these describes New York City public schools? It depends on who you ask. Six years after Mayor Michael Bloomberg successfully persuaded the New York State Legislature to give him control of the nation's largest public school system, New Yorkers remain sharply split over the success or failure of that experiment.

Those divisions, centering around who can best make decisions about the education of 1.1 million students, will come to the fore in the coming year as the State Legislature prepares to decide whether to end mayoral control, modify it or keep it in its current form. Sixteen months before the law creating this system of school governance is set to expire, hearings already are taking place, reports are being written and positions taken. In short, lines are already being drawn.

Studying the Options

A number of efforts to influence the debate on school governance already are underway.

At the urging of the Assembly leadership, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum has established a Commission on School Governance that commissioned a number of papers (available on its Web site) and has been meeting with stakeholders and experts since November. "We cast a very wide net," said Joe Viteritti, executive director of the commission and a professor of public policy at Hunter. "It's been very illuminating." The group hopes to issue a report with recommendations.

In a preview of the kind of dissension that could run through this debate, four members of Gotbaum's group resigned last year reportedly because of statements by Gotbaum criticizing mayoral control.

The City Council has a working group that has been meeting privately with key players and experts and will hold a full day of public hearings on March 3. The group expects to prepare a report that could form the basis for specific recommendations by the City Council to the legislature.

The United Federation of Teachers has conducted public forums on governance in each of the boroughs. (The remaining one, in Queens, will take place Feb 28.) It, too, has formed a task force that hopes to formulate recommendations.

GLOBAL PENSIONS

NY pension funds demand transparency

by Keren Holland 20 February 2008

US - New York's pension funds have called on 10 of America's largest companies to reveal their political contributions.

New York City comptroller William C. Thompson, Jr., filed the resolutions on behalf of the New York City Employees Retirement System (NYCERS), the Teacher's Retirement System for the City of New York (TRS), the New York City Police Pension Fund, the New York City Fire Department Fund and the New York City Board of Education Retirement System (BERS).

He said: "Shareholders need full and complete disclosure of companies' political expenditures to fully evaluate the political uses of the corporate assets.

"The pension funds believe that companies must ensure transparency and accountability in any contributions to political activities."

Companies urged to make the disclosure were Halliburton Corporation of Houston; Duke Energy of Charlotte; Charles Schwab Corporation of San Francisco; DTE Energy of Detroit; Wal-Mart Stores of Bentonville; United Technologies Corporation of Hartford; Devon Energy of Oklahoma City; Computer Sciences Corporation of El Segundo; Entergy Corporation of New Orleans; and, Union Pacific of Omaha.

United Technologies Corporation has already agreed to adopt the proposal to prepare a report that includes the accounting of the company's funds used for political contributions; the identification of the person who made the political contributions; and a copy of the company's internal guidelines governing political contributions.

Under the proposal, the report must then be presented to the audit committee of its board of directors and posted on the company's website.

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum, who is a trustee of NYCERS, said: "Companies that are willing to be held accountable for their political expenditures make for better long term investments.

"By pushing companies to disclose their policies for political contributions, the New York City pension funds are contributing to a more transparent political process. I am proud that the pension funds are once again leading the way in shareholder activism."

DAILY NEWS

Schools construction project nixes use of artificial turf made from ground tires

BY ADAM LISBERG
DAILY NEWS CITY HALL BUREAU

Thursday, February 21st 2008, 4:00 AM

A controversial type of artificial turf made of pulverized tires will no longer be used in a \$25 million city school playground construction project because of concerns about possible health hazards.

The [Trust for Public Land](#) has used "crumb rubber infill" turf at 18 city playgrounds, but will switch to a different turf at the next seven it builds.

"We're moving away from the crumb rubber," the group's Troy Farmer told the Daily News. "There's really no firm evidence that there's anything to be frightened of, but as long as people are concerned, better safe than sorry."

The move puts new pressure on the Parks Department, which insists the turf is safe despite growing concern from parents and health advocates that the true risks are unknown. A bill in [Albany](#) would put a six-month moratorium on its use.

Crumb rubber infill turf uses tiny bits of recycled tires to cushion the spaces between blades of green artificial grass, with tens of thousands of pounds being used in an average field.

"There are millions of these [tiny bits]," said critic [Geoffrey Croft](#) of [NYC Park Advocates](#). "They are flying up in people's faces. People are eating them. They wind up in the wash."

The tires contain heavy metals like lead and cadmium as well as volatile organic compounds and other chemicals, but there is no consensus about whether they are unsafe.

The city Health Department contends that "health risks are unlikely from exposure to the levels of chemicals found in the turf," but is sponsoring a review of scientific studies about it. The \$100,000 report, paid for by the New York Community Trust, is expected to be released in the spring.

[Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe](#) has repeatedly said the department has no plans to stop using crumb rubber infill turf, citing the Health Department's position.

[Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum](#), who unsuccessfully pushed Benepe last year for a scientific analysis of the groundup tires, said the city needs to change course.

"Even as evidence began to suggest that artificial turf may pose health risks, the Parks Department continued to make plans to install dozens more artificial turf fields," Gotbaum said. "The city has a responsibility to protect children from harm."

At [Thomas Jefferson Park](#) in East Harlem Wednesday, a group of 13-year-olds playing football said they had no idea they were tackling each other on groundup tires.

"That makes me not want to play here anymore," said [Michael Valentin](#).

Not everyone was as concerned at [Brooklyn's](#) Cadman Plaza, though, where several parents said the turf was better than the ripped-up grass it replaced.

"I have no problem with my kids playing here," said [Andrew Cribb](#), 50, who was playing soccer with 13-year-old Esme and 6-year-old Vivian. "It's a great improvement over the mud puddle it used to be."

alisberg@nydailynews.com

CITY LIMITS

City Limits WEEKLY
Week of: February 25, 2008
Number: 628

NEW QUESTIONS ABOUT POLICING SCHOOLS

Critics say school security accountability is absent—just ask eighth-grader Genesis Seaton. > *Helen Zelon*

Misbehaving students in New York City's public schools may very well be sent to the principal's office, or sentenced to detention, or suspended when they earn an educator's displeasure. But they also seem to end up in handcuffs rather often these days — treated in a more criminal fashion by the school safety agents who can arrest students as a police officer would adults on the street.

With each cherub in chains whose photo and story lands in the tabloids — and even those who don't — the question of who is responsible for arrests made in schools becomes more pressing. The Department of Education says the NYPD is responsible, because school safety agents are hired and trained by the city's police force. But according to the NYPD, responsibility rests with the DOE, because school safety agents (SSAs) are under the immediate supervision of individual school principals.

Thus SSAs reside in a kind of accountability limbo, a 4,600-strong group that seems to operate in a contrary fashion to the transparency so vocally prized by DOE and Mayor Bloomberg. The New York Civil Liberties Union charges that SSAs are not being held to account for their actions, because neither the NYPD nor the DOE are required to report criminal incidents in the schools. "We know they have the data," says NYCLU advocacy director Udi Ofer. "But they refuse to release the raw data to the public."

To address the situation, NYCLU has drawn up proposed legislation called The Student Safety Act, which proposes direct lines of accountability for SSAs, with regular reporting and the provision that issues can be brought to the Civilian Complaint Review Board, as is true for questions about NYPD behavior. Agencies with portfolios as varied as the Correctional Association, Advocates for Children, and the Children's Defense Fund all support the Act. But unless and until the act is embraced by City Council — and there's no sign of that at present, as no Council member has yet adopted the measure — the efforts of parents and advocates to learn more about specific arrests may continue to be impeded by DOE, individual schools and the NYPD.

Take the case of Genesis Seaton, an eighth-grader at Nathan Straus Prep on the Lower East Side. On January 8, Genesis was handcuffed, arrested, and transported by van to the Seventh Precinct by school safety officers, where she remained restrained until a kind-hearted sergeant asked that she be made more comfortable, by cuffing only one hand to the metal chair where she sat. Unlike 5-year-old Dennis Rivera, who was handcuffed last month at a Queens school, Genesis' story didn't land in the dailies. But her arrest symbolizes a critical issue for the city's students and families, with difficult questions for the Department of Education and the NYPD.

There's little argument over what happened: Genesis and some friends were together at school when a fire extinguisher that had been standing on a table (an unexplained violation of OSHA rules) fell or was knocked to the floor. The impact caused the extinguisher to flood the room with smoke-like, fire-retardant foam and fumes; the area was evacuated and some students received medical attention for potential inhalation injuries, including

one student with asthma who was treated on-site and three who were taken to area hospitals, evaluated, and released. Genesis was handcuffed by school safety agents — at the explicit direction of school principal Esteban Barrientos, she maintains — bundled into a police van and transported to the local police precinct, where she was cuffed to a chair until her parents came. Calls to Esteban Barrientos were not returned to City Limits.

Genesis had never been in trouble before, in school or out; she is not a disciplinary problem, a truant, or a child with a record of behavior challenges. Her parents sought an explanation from the school. They also wanted to know why she had been denied the medical attention offered to the other students. Appointments made in advance to meet with the principal were not kept; on one occasion, they, with their attorney Robert Leino, waited 45 minutes until they were turned away. No one at the school has acknowledged the incident to Genesis or to her parents. It is, her mother says, as if it never happened.

Attorney Leino says the arrest potentially violates constitutional protections against unreasonable search and seizure. "We believe that it was a wrongful arrest. It was unreasonable on the facts that occurred" — the fire extinguisher and subsequent smoke/foam flood. "For that, she was arrested; she was cuffed and taken to the precinct. That is unreasonable in our opinion." Additionally, he says, Genesis was denied timely medical attention: "My understanding is she did have difficulty breathing. Something happened, physically."

"At some level, there must be accountability. In that kind of situation ... an employee is acting on behalf of or under the authority of an employer, such as a school principal," says Leino. The reticence of the DOE is "just something they do to escape responsibility – it's a smokescreen, but they will be held accountable." The family is contemplating taking legal action.

The DOE, pressed to respond, acknowledged the incident but not the arrest. In an e-mail message, DOE spokeswoman Margie Feinberg wrote, "According to the school, in the early afternoon of January 8, a student reportedly knocked over a fire extinguisher, filling the classroom and the entire first floor of the school with smoke. The school was evacuated [sic] at 12:30 pm. Three other students were taken to local hospitals by EMS where they were treated and released. A fourth student suffered an asthma attack and was treated by EMS at the scene. The school reopened at 1:15 pm. Police, FDNY and EMS responded to the scene. You will need to check with DCPI if there were any arrests." In a second e-mail, Feinberg further noted, "School Safety Officers are the employees of NYPD and it would be improper for us to speak on their behalf."

DCPI, the communications arm of the NYPD, did not permit City Limits to speak with police personnel involved in the arrest, although precinct officers did confirm Genesis' detention there. Principal Barrientos filed an incident report with the DOE, as required. But what happened to the SSAs involved remains unknown.

This pattern is not atypical, according to Ofer of the NYCLU. And a climate where police incidents can go unchecked poses a critical risk to city youth: Donna Lieberman, NYCLU executive director, testified before City Council that overpolicing and overreliance on harsh discipline criminalizes students, pushing them along the "school to prison pipeline."

"We're in an environment where school discipline has been taken over by the Police Department," says Ofer. "The system is broken and needs to be fixed." The SSAs include more than 200 weapons-armed NYPD officers. Even so, at the highest-risk "Impact" schools, few events – only about 6 percent – qualify as criminal incidents.

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum strongly supports the regular, public reporting of school safety incidents. "With all this open transparency in government, nobody can get any real information on how many actual incidents take place," she notes ironically. "We need a systematic reporting mechanism so we can get that information. We're not getting the true and accurate information, and we should."

Gotbaum speaks from personal experience, having been subjected to a metal detector screening and a hands-on-the-table, electronic wand prior to a visit to a Bronx high school. Even after Gotbaum made her public-official status known and the host principal expressed his concern, school safety agents persisted in scanning her for potential weapons. "The principal was mortified," says Gotbaum. "If this happens to me, as a public official," she asks, "what is it like for the children? If the school principal can't stop the school safety officers, where's the accountability?"

"If the Police Department is the entity that's supervising the agents, and no police officer is in sight, who's minding the store?"

Still, Gotbaum is doubtful that the Civilian Complaint Review Board can be directed to take responsibility for school safety agents. "I don't think anybody in this atmosphere is putting more money in," she says, referring to the tightening economic climate. So the Student Safety Act's progress has, for the moment, stalled in City Council. Whether that's primarily economics-driven or underpinned by political caution in an election year, the issue remains controversial. Elected officials approached for comment, including U.S. Rep. Nydia Velazquez and Mayor Bloomberg, declined to speak with City Limits on the subject. DOE officials said that commenting on the Student Safety Act would be premature, as they have not seen the act and thus have not reviewed it.

Councilman Robert Jackson, who chairs the Education Committee, points to "a lack of clarity" in the lines of responsibility and accountability. "In today's world, a child can be arrested for assault, when in another time, that child would be sent to the dean's office, the parents would be called, and the child would be suspended."

An institutional lack of candor is also troubling, says Jackson: "I don't think we hear about many incidents that occur."

"There needs to be absolute clarity and transparency, and there needs to be an objective appeals process independent of the NYPD," he said.

- Helen Zelon

4 » LOCALES Y NACIÓN

» Propuesta de ley

Por los beneficios sociales

Concejales y líderes comunitarios quieren terminar con la burocracia

Igor González
igor.gonzalez@hoynyc.com

MANHATTAN

El acceso de familias de bajos recursos a beneficios sociales, podría ser más fácil, de prosperar un proyecto de ley que permitiría que trabajadores de organizaciones comunitarias ingresen a oficinas municipales a representar a las familias que lo necesiten.

La propuesta de ley, llamada 'Ready Access to Assistance', (REAACT) facilitaría el acceso no sólo a los servicios y beneficios del sistema social, sino que además, asistiría a personas con impedimentos físicos o con escaso conocimiento del inglés.

El anuncio fue dado a conocer ayer por la Defensora Pública, Betsy Gotbaum, grupos comunitarios y miembros del Centro de Estrategias Brennan, quienes, además, publicaron un informe llamado "Mejorando el Sistema de Beneficios Públi-



» Unidos. La Defensora Pública Betsy Gotbaum, ayer en las escalinatas de la Alcaldía. (Foto: Igor González)

cos de Nueva York".

"Esta propuesta es de sentido común. A los trabajadores o voluntarios comunitarios se les debería permitir ingresar a las oficinas municipales para ayudar a las personas a navegar por el proceso burocrático", dijo Gotbaum.

La funcionaria explicó que "estos trabajadores podrían ayudar otorgando información crucial, llenando planillas y ofreciendo traducciones".

El concejal Eric Gioia, copatrocinador del proyecto de ley, agregó que "el objetivo de los trabajadores comunitarios

del gobierno debería ser ayudar a las personas para que se ayuden a sí mismas, permitiéndole a los neoyorquinos obtener información y asistencia cuando más la necesitan".

Hasta ahora el proyecto de ley tiene 33 copatrocinadores.

The NEW YORK Sun



Markowitz Leads Democrats in Mayoral Poll

BY GRACE RAUH - Staff Reporter of the Sun

February 27, 2008

URL: <http://www.nysun.com/article/71919>

Rarely mentioned as a leading candidate for mayor in 2009, Marty Markowitz is leading a recent poll weighing the prospects of potential Democratic candidates to succeed Mayor Bloomberg.

In a WNBC/Marist poll released yesterday, 18% of the registered Democrats surveyed said they would support the Brooklyn president if next year's Democratic primary for mayor were held today. Thirteen percent of voters surveyed said they would support Rep. Anthony Weiner, 11% said they would support City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, 9% backed the city comptroller, William Thompson Jr., 9% chose the public advocate, Betsy Gotbaum, and 4% said they would support Council Member Tony Avella. Thirty-six percent of voters said they were unsure whom they would support.

"I am genuinely flattered," Mr. Markowitz, who is considered by many to be Brooklyn's most vocal cheerleader, said yesterday. He said he does not feel slighted that his name has not been floated more often for mayor because he said he has not yet decided whether to run.

As of January 15, Mr. Markowitz had raised about \$901,000 for a political campaign, according to the city's Campaign Finance Board. Mr. Thompson had raised about \$4.2 million, Mr. Weiner had raised about \$3.6 million, and Ms. Quinn had raised nearly \$2.5 million.

Yesterday's poll also found that 66% of voters say Mr. Bloomberg is doing an excellent or good job and that 25% of voters want him to run for president in 2008. Sixty-six percent of voters surveyed said they did not want him to run. Seventy-four percent of voters surveyed said they don't think Mr. Bloomberg can win as an independent candidate.

The poll was conducted between February 18 and 20. The survey of 649 city voters had a margin of error of plus or minus 4%, and the survey of 437 Democratic voters had a margin of error of plus or minus 5%.

Brooklyn Daily Eagle

Marty Leads the Field, Says Poll

by Brooklyn Eagle (), published online 02-28-2008

According to the results of a citywide Marist poll made public Tuesday evening, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz leads the field of mayoral candidates. Other candidates include Comptroller William Thompson Jr. (a former Brooklyn deputy borough president), Congressman Anthony Weiner, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum and Queens Councilman Tony Avella. The story was also carried in the Daily News yesterday.

The NEW YORK Sun



City Will Reward Students With Phones

Staff Reporter of the Sun

The city is launching a campaign to motivate public school students by giving them free cell phones and upgrading features if they do things such as show up to class and behave.

Cell phones are banned from schools, and students will not be allowed to bring to school the new Samsung U740 flip phones they would be getting.

Seven high-need middle schools are receiving the phones. If students meet standards developed by their schools, their phones will be upgraded with ring tones, extra minutes, and text messaging ca-

pacity.

The program is being run by a Harvard economics professor, Roland Fryer, who was named the Department of Education's chief equality officer last year. Researchers will study its effects on student learning.

The city's public advocate, Betsy Gotbaum, criticized the program as a mixed message, since cell phones are banned, and as "yet another gimmick to justify excessive testing."

School officials said there is no contradiction.

The program is being privately financed.

2128108



NYC Pensions Makes Fiscal Move To Protect Affordable Housing

BY KEVIN SHIN

PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 28, 2008

The New York City Pension Funds agreed Thursday to abandon investments deemed to negatively impact affordable housing, according to a press release from City Comptroller William C. Thompson, Jr.

The move comes after affordable housing and tenant advocates accused some of the real estate investment trusts (REITs) of buying "predatory equity," or purchasing whole properties or stakes in properties occupied by low-income tenants in the hopes that they would be replaced by higher-paying tenants.

"We must all work together to maximize protection and affordability for tenants in both existing and future investments," wrote Thompson, who first proposed the commitment, in the release. "With today's announcement we are strengthening our commitment to invest in affordable housing by creating an opportunity to decline investments that could negatively affect affordability."

All together, the NYC Pension Funds manages \$110 billion worth of city employees' retirement assets in its five funds. About a \$1.8 billion slice of those assets is invested with REITs, companies that buy and sell properties for a profit and distribute the proceeds to their investors.

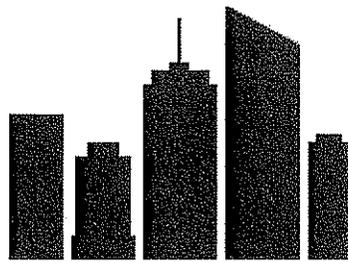
Thompson's plan specifically aims to compel pension funds to avoid investing in "predatory equity."

Opponents of the plan have argued that committing to such a principle goes against the pension funds' legal duty to pursue investments that would deliver the highest returns to city employees' retirement accounts.

"I'm all for affordable housing. For sure I wish my own rent was lower," said Michael Washington, a teacher at P.S. 153 and a contributor to the Teachers' Retirement System of the City of New York. "But I've been contributing to my pension with the expectation that they'll be able to fund my retirement in the future."

City officials are confident that the new investment mandate will not hinder the funds' ability to maximize returns.

"Once again, the investment powers of the Funds are being put to good use in addition to maximizing returns," wrote Betsy Gotbaum, public advocate and trustee of the New York City Employees' Retirement System, in the release. "This new real estate investment principle not only helps bring landlords and developers to the table and holds them accountable, but it demonstrates the Funds' firm commitment to protecting affordable housing for low-income New Yorkers."



gothamist™

FEBRUARY 28, 2008

Mixed (Text) Messages from Department of Education



Mayor Bloomberg and the City Council may not agree on the appropriateness of cell phones in public schools, but the DoE is now handing out cell phones to a select group of students. The privately funded pilot program will give cell phones to students and reward positive behavior, such as showing up to class, behaving and doing well.

In an ironic twist, the Samsung phones **will not actually be allowed in class**, per Mayor Bloomberg's ban, calling them an unnecessary distraction. (Parents have been battling in the courts to allow their kids to bring their phones.) Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum, who supports school children's right to bear cell phones, is unenthusiastic about the project and described it as just another wasteful attempt to foist more standardized tests on students.

The cell phones come with 130 prepaid minutes and will allow students to receive text messages, reminding them of homework and upcoming tests. The Pavlovian texting experiment is overseen by Harvard economics professor Roland Fryer, who was recently named the DoE's chief equality officer. Fryer told the Times, "You can try messaging campaigns by putting up billboards; in my neighborhood back home it was 'Crack is whack, school is cool.' Basically, the message was whack...We want to reach kids where they are, and where they are is hanging out; they're texting."

Last year, in another interview with the Times, Fryer discussed brainstorming rewards with students and how his idea for a special Air Jordan for good students was shot down, "It took about three seconds for one of them to look at me and say, 'Oh, you mean Air Nerds?'"

Queens Tribune

Phys Ed Widely Ignored In Queens Schools

2/28/08

BY JULIET WERNER

Public schools are required to offer physical education classes. State law mandates that students in grades K through three have daily physical education and that students in grades four through six have a minimum of three gym classes or 120 minutes a week. Not only are these regulations widely ignored, there is no system in place to enforce them.

"With 43 percent of New York City students overweight or obese, it is unacceptable that more resources are not put toward their physical edu-

cation," Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum said at a Jan. 31 Assembly hearing. "We must work together to help implement better physical activity programs in our schools and ensure that all schools comply with state-mandated measures for physical education."

Gotbaum said the schools play an important role in setting the City's children on the right track.

"[F]or many children in our sedentary culture, physical education at school may be their only opportunity for physical activity during the day and their only preparation for an active lifestyle," Gotbaum said. "Regular physical activity for children has significant health and wellness benefits, and has been associated with increased academic performance, and improving self-esteem and mental health."

Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan (D-Ridgewood), who held the hearing, agreed with the Public Advocate.

"We know physical activity improves academic performance by contributing to overall health and by teaching children valuable concepts like teamwork and problem solving," Assemblywoman

Nolan said. "The challenge is that despite a law requiring schools to provide physical education, many students in New York State do not receive instruction, and that is a shame."

According to InsideSchools.org Director Pamela Wheaton, a lack of physical education is typically linked to limited space on campus, caused by overcrowding. In Queens, restricted space is also the result of placing schools in converted buildings.

"With so much emphasis on academics and test scores, I think physical education and the arts have taken backseat," Wheaton said.

PTA president Laura Del Greco said students at Flushing's PS 21 only get one gym class a week.

"We're always emphasizing more exercise," DelGreco said, adding she was unaware of the state regulations.

The public advocate's last report on the matter, titled, "All Work and No Play," was released in 2004 following a survey of 100 public elementary schools selected at random. The survey found that 20.6 percent of the public elementary schools surveyed

lacked regular access to physical education classes, all elementary schools surveyed were in violation of the New York State regulations requiring daily physical education for students in third grade, 79.3 percent of the schools with students in grades four were in violation of New York State regulations mandating at least 120 minutes of physical education for those students and only four percent of all schools surveyed had an athletic team.

The public advocate is currently working to update the 2004 report. Preliminary re-

sults show an improvement in access to physical education for third graders.

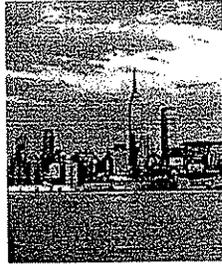
In his Jan. 9 State of the State address, Governor Eli Spitzer declared his commitment to improved regulation.

"We will ask Comptroller [Thomas] DiNapoli to help enforce the State's strong, but widely ignored, physical education requirements by including them in his regular school district audits," Spitzer said. "And I have directed the Department of Health, which has now begun gathering data to report to me annually on our progress."



With 43 percent of New York City students overweight the City mandates schools should schedule 120 minutes of phys ed a week.

GLOBAL PENSIONS



New York

NY pension funds focus on housing

by Keren Holland 29 February 2008

US – New York City pension funds have committed to affordable housing by adopting real estate investment principles which allow them to 'opt-out' of investing in individual properties that could adversely affect tenants and affordability.

The principles will also see pension funds engaging building management to ensure fair treatment of tenants, especially in instances when ownership changes.

In addition, they will encourage new affordable housing opportunities to be presented to the pension funds in response to their open RFP for Economically Targeted Investment (ETI) programs, which protect and preserve the affordability of buildings.

ETI objectives are to provide the funds a market rate of return that is commensurate with the risk assumed, to fill capital gaps in New York City, and to provide specific quantitative or qualitative benefits to New York City and, in particular, its low-, moderate- and middle-income communities and populations.

The pension funds, which have assets totaling more than US\$110bn, with \$1.8bn invested in commercial and residential real estate, have \$105m (over 15,000 units) invested in residential properties in New York. They also have \$575.9 million invested in ETIs.

New York City comptroller William C. Thompson said the pension funds had been able to combine their commitments to producing strong returns on their investments for New York City retirees, and protecting and creating affordable housing for New Yorkers.

"It is the fiduciary duty of the pension funds to pursue investments that deliver appropriate risk-adjusted returns.

"To date, the pension funds have successfully accomplished both objectives and will endeavor to work with others to increase the city's affordable housing stock."

The New York City pension funds are the New York City Employees' Retirement System (NYCERS), Teachers' Retirement System of the City of New York (TRS), New York City Police Pension Fund, New York City Fire Department Pension Fund and the New York City Board of Education Retirement System (BERS).

Betsy Gotbaum, public advocate and NYCERS trustee, said: "Once again, the investment powers of the funds are being put to good use in addition to maximising returns.

"This new real estate investment principle not only helps bring landlords and developers to the table and holds them accountable, but it demonstrates the funds' firm commitment to protecting affordable housing for low-income New Yorkers."

The New York Times

Groups Urge a Moratorium On City Use of Artificial Turf

2129108

By TIMOTHY WILLIAMS

Several environmental and civic groups are calling for a moratorium on the use of artificial turf in new sports fields in the city, and question the seriousness with which the Bloomberg administration is investigating the turf's potential hazards.

In a letter to the city's parks and health commissioners, dated Thursday, the groups say the installation of such fields should be suspended pending the results of a review of health risks being conducted by the health department.

"The city has a responsibility to protect children, and a vested interest in protecting the environment," the letter states. "Yet even as evidence suggested that artificial turf may pose health risks and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene initiated its review, the Parks Department continued to make plans to install dozens more artificial-turf fields. The Parks Department has shown little interest in studying artificial turf's effects on health and the environment."

The letter adds, "This brings into question the agencies' commitment to conducting a thorough health and safety review of artificial turf."

The call for a moratorium is part of a growing concern among parents, public health officials and environmentalists about synthetic-turf fields. Thousands of the fields have been installed nationwide in recent years, including 77 in the city during the past decade. Twenty-three more are planned.

The letter was signed by Betsy Gotbaum, the public advocate, who is a former city parks commissioner; Christian DiPalermo, the executive director of New Yorkers for Parks; and members of the Natural Resources Defense Council and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest.

Adrian Benepe, the parks commissioner, is an advocate for turf fields. He has said the surface is safe and cheaper and more durable than grass.

"With obesity and related illnesses on the rise, creating opportunities for physical activity has never been more important, and we have built and maintain

more than 800 athletic fields to support recreation in New York City," Mr. Benepe said in a statement. "Most fields are natural turf, but in building more sports fields, Parks explores all appropriate technologies, including synthetic-turf fields, which can support year-round play and are cost-effective and 'green,' as they do not require weekly mowing, watering with potable water, applying chemical herbicides and fertilizers, seeding, polluting machinery or time-intensive maintenance tasks."

Tuncer B. Edil, an engineering professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and a researcher for FieldTurf, a company that has built many of the city's turf fields, also said the material poses no hazards.

"Extensive and thorough scientific reviews in the United States and Europe have continually reached this same conclusion," he said in a statement on Thursday.

Critics, however, have said that synthetic turf, particularly crumb rubber fields made from recycled tires, may pose risks to athletes because of the presence of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, which may be carcinogenic.

It remains unclear, however, how easily the hydrocarbons can be absorbed by the human body.

In recent months, several organizations and municipalities that have installed artificial turf have had second thoughts.

Earlier this month, the Trust for Public Land announced that it would no longer use crumb rubber infill for the fields it builds at school playgrounds in the city. And Newark city government declared one of its synthetic turf fields to be a "public health hazard" after researchers found that dust there had levels of lead more than triple the federal standard for indoor spaces. The field was closed several weeks ago.

The city's health department has been researching turf fields for several months. The department's Web site says its study will not involve scientific analyses of turf fields, but will instead review "current scientific research on crumb rubber products," and identify gaps in "what is known about potential health effects."

Although it has not yet completed its review, the agency has determined that "health risks are unlikely from exposure to the levels of chemicals found in artificial turf," according to its Web site.

In the past, the Parks Department has cited a 2003 study at University of Alberta that concluded that crumb rubber fields had a low potential for causing health problems, but the agency did not disclose that the study had been financed by the Tire Recycling Management Agency of Alberta.