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Mayor Forges Ahead to Year 2

By Dan Janison
Staff Writer

Trumpeting his administration's rookie-year successes, Mayor Michael Bloomberg is resolving in 2003 to keep up the practice of ignoring his aides' advice -- by occasionally sounding out new, untested proposals in public.

In a year-end interview with Newsday, the mayor added that he will not flinch from what could be a politically risky retooling of city agencies, such as the Fire Department.

And the self-made billionaire and former Democrat vowed to remain a Republican, even if he doesn't "have anything in common with ultra-conservatives."

His organizational approach works as well in government as it did in business, he is prepared to argue.

"The staff always says, and I think conventional advice would be, you can never be seen to float an idea and then walk away from it because they write 'flip-flop' or whatever," Bloomberg said. "That's not the world I came from or think should exist.

"I think that's healthy, that's democracy," he said in his wall-less second-floor City Hall office.

Much of the year's major city government news, of course, was more concrete than philosophical.

Property taxes rose. Fire fatalities declined and crime fell in most categories even though there were fewer police. Deficits swelled; the city borrowed for operating costs; agency budgets were sliced. Two major unions signed contracts, but with the hard parts -- concessions -- still to be fought over.

Recently, his voter-approval rating plunged, with a Quinnipiac University poll reporting last month that 46 percent disapproved of his job performance and 41 percent approved. But the mayor could cite goals that were fulfilled, such as winning control of the school system and agreeing with the council to ban smoking in most workplaces. Emphasizing public health, he

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Mayor Michael Bloomberg

How Do You Grade Bloomberg's Job?

After one year as mayor, how do you think Michael Bloomberg is doing?

- ☐ A - Excellent Job
- ☐ B - Good
- ☐ C - Competent
- ☐ D - Poor
- ☐ E - Failing Miserably

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News/Sports

said the year's most underrated success story may have been the high ratings won by city hospitals in professional evaluations.

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"We've shown that the people -- not me but the whole administration -- does know how to run a city," he said. "You can question whether it's going in the right direction, but those are ideological things. ... Nobody will say the administration is floundering."

[Rudy Releases Some Records](#)

Bloomberg insisted his personal transition from technology-age businessman to public servant "is not limiting in any meaningful way" -- despite continual chafing with the news media.

Bloomberg also said he would continue contributing to other campaigns as he did before taking office.

"I have a right to a life," he said.

Bloomberg added that he did restrain himself, for partisan purposes, from contributing money this year to the campaign of a Democrat.

"There's one person who ran -- I won't say who -- I wish I could have sent him some money. But he was in the wrong party. This guy happened to be a Democrat. He's someone I know for a long time; he's really good. And he knows if I could have helped, I would have," Bloomberg said.

"I asked the Republican Party for the opportunity to run [for mayor] and I won't disappoint them," Bloomberg said. "And I will help the Republican Party, consistent with my own personal beliefs."

"If the Democrats said to me in 21/2 years, 'You're running as a Republican. We'll give you the nomination for the Democratic Party as well' -- remember Koch did that -- will I take it? Sure. Absolutely. But I'm not going to walk away from the Republicans."

Bloomberg's political ascent prompted a morass of unique conflict-of-interest questions involving his holdings, business and charitable contributions. He declined, for a second year, to release his tax forms in full but did disclose his charitable contributions. He has separated himself from investing in stocks of companies that do business with the city, and refrained from involvement in picking city bond underwriters because one of them, Merrill Lynch, owns a fifth of his company, Manhattan-based Bloomberg LP.

He said he is maintaining a proper separation of roles.

"If there's anything big, they [company officials] will call me and tell me what they're doing," he said. "I'm a believer in delegation, as you know."

"I can't ask them to run the company and then second-guess them."

This year, he said, he did not attend a public-service event called "Best of Bloomberg" with various programs for children. "I've not gone to visit [the company]. ... I didn't go to the White House correspondents dinner. I want to keep a distance for a while."

But he adds, "Next year maybe I'd go, sure."

Bloomberg said he would not want to have previous mayors criticize him, noting it would be wrong if he did the same to the company officials who followed him. "You don't want people at the company to say, 'Oh, he's coming back,'" he said.

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"If a customer sends me an e-mail complaining, I'll just forward it. I don't even bother to write or call. ... If I have to, I say, 'Hey, I don't run the company anymore.'"

"I look at the numbers. I get the financial statements. And the company's doing well. I pay for the product here, for people I think should have it I could see whether it works."

Heading city government is in some ways easier than managing a business, he said.

"In business, people tend to question the head guy more than they do in government," Bloomberg said. "The bureaucracy may be marginally harder to deal with, but that depends on the size of the company and the industry you're in."

Bloomberg faces a political split with firefighters -- the heroes of the World Trade Center disaster -- as he looks to make systemic changes.

Shifting the city's firehouse map to fit population changes may be a slow, difficult process, but "you have to change as the world changes," he said. In that way, "there's nothing different about the Fire Department than any other agency."

He adds: "You can't worry about the politics. I don't know how I could look myself in the eye after my argument to the public was, 'Elect me, I don't have to worry about any obligations.'"

Earlier this year, Bloomberg called for new options on garbage disposal, including use of incinerators. That caused an angry backlash in communities that stood to get them -- aggravated by his comment that you wouldn't burn the stuff on Park Avenue. Seeing incineration as impossible to carry out in the next few years, he dropped the approach and started drawing up plans that environmental groups have roundly applauded.

Other remarks -- during the first couple months -- were viewed as political stumbles: an awkward joke about municipal firings; a flip suggestion there could be advantages to a fiscal control-board takeover.

Despite jail-system flascos that led to the resignation of his first correction commissioner, Bloomberg said his method of delegation -- the core of his managing method -- works. He did not rule out changes as needed, however.

"My job is picking them, supporting them, coordinating them, setting overall policy, clearly. But," he said, "you don't run a big organization by centralizing everything. You can't do it. It's just not practical."

Asked if it's easier to build political relationships with other elected officials by not embarrassing them, he said: "I don't know that it's easier."

"But I think people are people. ... Everyone wants recognition and respect. Those are the two key things."

"I think the commonality between business and government is that you are dealing with people. All people have the same fears and insecurities and aspirations, and requirements for social contact."

Ticking off successful appointments, Bloomberg mentions Health and Hospitals Corp. Chairman Benjamin Chu, Finance Commissioner Martha Stark, Transportation Commissioner Iris Weinshall, Homeless Services Commissioner

Lois Gibbs, and Environmental Commissioner Christopher Ward.

"The main asset of any organization, whether it's a company or a government, is its people," he said.

As for floating ideas casually, he added: "Look, I've always done it. You should hope I do. It gives you something to write about."

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