

They budget their words

Mike & Mark stingy on details for fixing looming deficit

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With nine days remaining in perhaps the most important mayoral race in a generation, one of the largest issues facing New York has become the one issue the candidates will not touch.

Public Advocate Mark Green and billionaire Michael Bloomberg are tight-lipped when it comes to the precise ways they would close a projected budget deficit that is expected to balloon to at least \$4 billion next year, measures that could affect the lives of every New Yorker.

"I think most of those things you have to negotiate, and the last place you want to do that is on the front page of the Daily News," Bloomberg said.

Said Green, "It would be really self-defeating to discuss contingencies which voters will regard as inevitabilities. That is just the way it is."

The city was bracing for tough times even before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The collapse of the twin towers has accelerated and deepened the economic tailspin by wiping out tens of thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in projected tax revenues.

The resulting deficits — a \$1 billion gap in the \$40 billion city budget, a \$4 billion chasm for fiscal 2003 — threaten to create the worst fiscal crisis since the city's brush with bankruptcy in the mid-1970s.

"It's a very serious crisis, one that can turn into a calamity if it is mismanaged," said City Controller Alan Hevesi, a Green supporter and adviser. "There is no

way that city services will not be affected."

Lack of specifics

Green, a Democrat, and Bloomberg, a Republican, make no attempt to minimize the budget problem.

But both candidates refuse to go beyond generalities to detail how they would achieve the huge savings needed. Neither has detailed what services he would seek to reduce or eliminate. And neither has specified what sacrifices he would ask of municipal employees.

Both candidates have agreed they would take the relatively pain-free step of imposing hiring freezes on municipal workers, but both have also yanked some of the most painful and politically problematic remedies off the table, closing the door, for example, to hiking taxes on businesses and city residents.

Hevesi, who lost to Green in the Democratic primary, defends the lack of specifics.

For one thing, he says, no one knows the magnitude of the problem. The exact extent of the shortfalls will depend, in part, on what if any budgetary assistance Albany and Washington will provide.

"If you were to be precise now, you would be scaring a lot of

people and causing a reaction in a democracy where people would be up in arms and lobbying and denouncing," he said.

"And, being candid," he added, "you have 11 days until the election. To go through the programs and the numbers now is not just possible."

The broad remedies Green and Bloomberg have sketched range from seeking unspecified savings from city agencies to obtaining relief from state and federal budget mandates.

Green said he is hopeful Wash-

ington will help, and he wants Albany to reimpose a longtime tax on commuters that provided more than \$400 million a year before it was jettisoned.

City workers eyed

Bloomberg opposes reviving the tax, saying it would hurt the city's business climate, and he said it's unrealistic to think Washington will provide budget aid.

Both candidates also speak hopefully of winning productivity savings from municipal workers.

"There is no question that if you are going to have a serious shortfall, the only way to make it up is by doing something with pension and salaries," Bloomberg said.

But he begged off when asked for details.

"I'm trying to be very realistic, which is a very difficult thing to do, you know, in the public environment," he said. "Once you are in office . . . it is somewhat easier. It is easier for a mayor to do it — negotiate things and then make them public."

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