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Thanks, *and could you fix that traffic light before you go?*

The mayor's last Staten Island town hall meeting turns into a mutual admiration opportunity

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The mayor of Staten Island said goodbye last night, and hundreds of well-wishers packed the ballroom of the Excelsior Grand in New Dorp to send him off with flowers, hugs, two standing ovations and money for the World Trade Center relief effort.

Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani held his 15th and final town hall meeting on Staten Island, the borough where 81 percent of voters helped to re-elect him four years ago. After answering the usual questions about traffic lights, housing, roads and education, he stopped to thank Islanders for making his eight years in office possible.

"I have a tremendous debt of gratitude to Staten Island. It's a wonderful place," Giuliani told about 400 people.



The mayor makes a point to the crowd at the Excelsior Grand in New Dorp.

"This is the best borough," he smiled. "Of course, you gave me the biggest percentage of the vote. I'm somewhat prejudiced in favor of Staten Island."

The mayor was unusually playful. He joked about anthrax and signed autographs, quipping that one photo made him look like a mobster leaving court.

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ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ MICHAEL McWEENEY

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani seems pleased with a bouquet of flowers given to him during the meeting.

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2001

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"The only difference is, there's no jacket over my head," he said, laughing.

When audience members suggested he become schools chancellor after leaving office in January, Giuliani countered that he might try his luck at stand-up comedy. A question about when he might endorse Republican Michael R. Bloomberg for mayor was dismissed with a breezy, "When I'm ready."

The mayor also praised Borough President Guy V. Molinari as the first person to suggest he run. Except for a spat over Giuliani's endorsement of Mario Cuomo for governor, the famously combative men have enjoyed a close relationship.

"The 12 or 15 people that may have voted against me are no longer allowed to live on Staten Island," Giuliani said jokingly, referring to Molinari's loyalty.

Commissioners each received a polite round of applause, which intensified with the introduction of Dongan Hills resident Richard Sheirer, director of the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management, Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik and Michael Regan, a deputy commissioner with the Fire Department — the three city agencies on the front lines of the rescue effort.

A senior from New Dorp High School, Krystal Bergmann, opened the meeting by presenting the mayor a check for $1,300 for families of the victims of the World Trade Center attacks. She raised the money by selling homemade ribbons for $1 each.

Education cuts

Instead of asking questions, many Islanders used their time at the microphones to thank the mayor. Even challenges from teachers, who are locked in bitter contract talks with the city, were gentle — in contrast to his last town hall meeting on Staten Island, a raucous Richmond Valley encounter with teachers over contracts and bus drivers over private express bus routes.

When Joan McKeever-Thomas, president of the Staten Island Federation of PTAs, stood up to protest the $120 million budget dispute between the mayor and Board of Education — and the board's subsequent cancellation of Project READ and arts programs — Giuliani launched into his standard lecture against the Board and Albany politicians, and accused the teachers' union of putting jobs before kids.

"You're trying to tell me we're not getting any money," Ms. McKeever-Thomas responded.

"I'm trying to tell you that even if we got the money, it wouldn't do any good," he replied.

"You can't say it wouldn't make a difference," she fired back.

After the meeting, Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers, said in a statement, "It's sad that the mayor never misses an opportunity to take a shot at New York City's public school educators."

'Mother-daughter' homes

Giuliani was also reacquainted with the problems of South Shore residents who say they bought homes decades ago, unaware their basement apartments were illegal, and are now struggling to legalize them.

Phil Stein, an Annadale resident and president of a civic group representing more than 100 owners of "mother-daughter" homes, told Giuliani little had been accomplished since the last town hall meeting, when the mayor promised them "you're going to win."

The complicated dispute has boiled down to an agreement that the city will legalize the homes if owners pay an architect to alter the plans to reflect the apartments. This has been the sticking point: A conventional architect would cost at least $2,000, said Stein.

Deputy Mayor Joseph Lhota told Stein the city has provided a list of three architects who will perform the conversion for about $200. Stein was surprised — the Buildings Department has recommended only one architect, he said, who charges $1,500.

"I'd like to know who it is because I'd like to get him arrested," responded Lhota, promising to in-

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ADVANCE PHOTO ■ MICHAEL McWEENEY

Mayor Rudy Giuliani talks to New Dorp High School senior Krystal Bergmann after she presented him with a check for $1,300 toward the disaster relief fund during the town hall meeting.

vestigate. "Sounds like a fix."

Richmondtown Loop

Since the meeting was held in New Dorp, a Community Board 2 neighborhood, a number of board members attended and brought up area issues.

The continuing effort to get the Richmondtown Loop demapped was highlighted by Carol Donovan of the Richmondtown/Clarke Avenue Civic Association.

Ms. Donovan said that the civic group had presented the mayor with 50,000 signatures in the past in support of the demapping, but still nothing has been done.

Loop opponents argue the mapped roadways, if built, would send large amounts of traffic into their neighborhoods, while supporters insist the streets that travel through Historic Richmond Town must be removed.

"To demap a street you must come up with an alternate," responded Iris Weinshall, Department of Transportation commissioner.

Ms. Weinshall noted that a consultant had been hired in May to study the proposal and that a meeting with Mid-Island Councilman James Oddo and the DOT on the issue is scheduled for Tuesday.

Todt Hill traffic signal

Fred Guinta, vice president of the Dongan Hills Civic Association, raised the issue of the recently installed traffic signal at Todt Hill and Circle roads, which he said is encouraging commuters to take back roads within the community and is causing congestion.

"This light is a menace . . . it never met warrants. It should be removed," Guinta said.

Weinshall said the investigation for the traffic light began after pressure from the Todt Hill Civic Association and the principal of Staten Island Academy.

"The investigation [revealed that] the light did meet warrants and that's why it was put up," Ms. Weinshall said. "Once it meets warrants we can't take it down, but you can make adjustments," she said, adding that she understands it is a problem with timing that is causing the traffic backups. DOT inspectors will investigate those problems and the appropriate changes will be made, Weinshall said.

The mayor remarked he had never been asked to "take a light down" before.

Another concerned resident, frustrated with all the city traffic congestion, suggested putting up detour signs in areas of the city affected by Sept. 11-related road closings to help people to navigate.

"We're back to normal," Giuliani said. "That's good."

Also attending the meeting were Deputy Borough President James Molinaro, the Republican candidate for borough president; Oddo (R-Mid Island); South Shore City Council candidates Janey Moran, a Democrat, and Andrew Lanza, a Republican.

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