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Vow to Err on Side of Openness

By Robert Polner
STAFF WRITER

In the early days of Michael Bloomberg's run for mayor, a group of his aides asked to discuss confidential polling results with him behind a closed door at campaign headquarters.

Bloomberg didn't like the idea very much, recalled aide Maureen Connelly, so he had the conference room's solid door replaced with a glass one.

While it's doubtful Bloomberg would put glass doors in City Hall when he gets the keys in January, he vowed yesterday to err on the side of openness as much as possible.

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a former federal prosecutor, practically made a fetish of tightly controlling information. He has faced many lawsuits over access to information concerning the Police Department, welfare and the Office of the First Lady, to name a few.

If Bloomberg lives up to the words he spoke yesterday, his approach as mayor could be quite different.

"Generally speaking," Bloomberg said, "I like to have things as open as possible. And the times you want to tear your hair out — when you see it in the paper and you say, well, I wish it wasn't there — should be offset by the benefits of having people communicate."

At Bloomberg News, said Connelly, the only private cubicle there belongs to Bloomberg. The partition is made of glass; inside is a sitting area. Bloomberg keeps his desk outside the door, in the common area.

Bloomberg designed the campaign headquarters as a flow-through. "He believes in an open environment and interaction," Connelly said.

But Bloomberg News also is a high-tech environment that could pass as the set for a reality-TV show like "Big Brother."

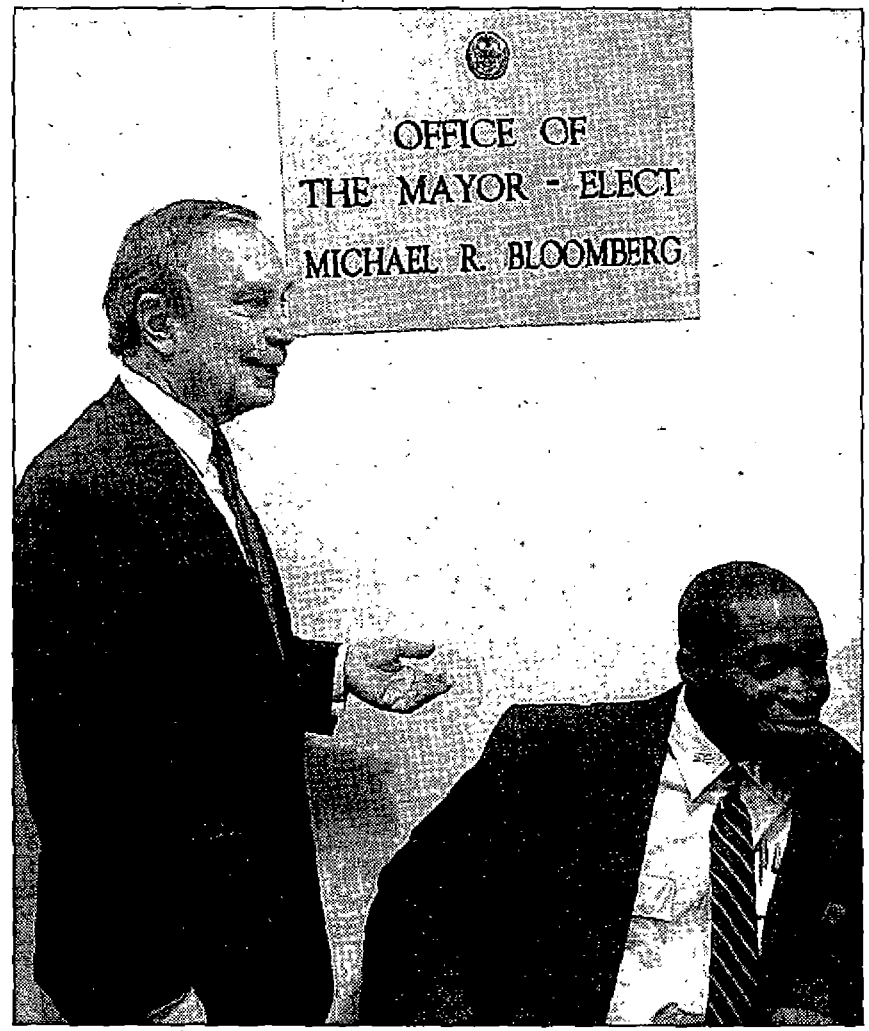


Photo by Shannon Stapleton
Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg with a security guard outside his transition office yesterday.

An extensive amount of electronic surveillance keeps track of the employees. Each one carries electronic access cards that allow the company to record their arrival and departure. Video cameras eyeball the workplace in a comprehensive way, and staffers work on computers that can automatically block the transmission of inappropriate or offensive words, in many languages.

In his first foray into elective politics, Bloomberg has run into turbulence over information flow. The self-made billionaire refused to release his tax returns, flouting a political convention. Bloomberg also conducted his TV ad bombardment in a somewhat stealthy way, declining to let the media know about the ads directly.

Yesterday, Bloomberg stopped by a city office overlooking City Hall that Giuliani has turned over for the transition. Giuliani is offering three of his top deputies for transition assistance. They are Robert Harding, Tony Coles and Tony Carbonetti.

But in a possible sign that the mayor-elect doesn't want Giuliani people breathing down his neck, Bloomberg said he may oversee the transition from his midtown headquarters. Bloomberg said he has not made hiring decisions and described the possibility of working from midtown as largely a matter of convenience.

"I don't know how to answer that," Bloomberg said, when asked whether he would run a more open government than Giuliani. "You want to have as much disclosure as you can."

When a reporter noted Giuliani's record of withholding public information to the point of litigation, Bloomberg said, "I'd be disappointed if we ever lost one of those suits. I'm sure you'll have them because no matter how much you give, there's always somebody that wants more."

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