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Mixers, Civics Lessons and Homework for Council's Freshmen

By DIANE CARDWELL

In a season when most students are finishing their terms and anticipating a well-earned winter break, a special group of rookies is in the midst of its own freshmen orientation. It could be called City Council 101: training for the incoming class of new members, nearly all of whom, despite having some governmental or legislative experience, have never held this particular office.

To stave off the chaos for which many experts have been bracing — there is one oft-articulated vision of 38 new members with no clue about how to even find the restrooms — City Council officials and other interested parties have begun offering a smorgasbord of assistance.

Recently, the central staff of the Council conducted daylong training sessions in which each department discussed various aspects of operations and procedures. More in-depth seminars are planned later this month. The School of Public Policy at Baruch College developed a curriculum, complete with guidebook and simulation exercises, which is being offered at a three-day retreat this weekend. The Working Families Party has offered two dinners with discussions, and plans to hold a budget policy retreat and a speaker candidate forum by the middle of this month. Even the current administration has become involved, leading a series of field trips to ground zero for incoming Council members.

While concern about the Council had already been percolating for months because of the profound effect of the new term limits law — which emptied more than two-thirds of the 51 seats in a single swoop — the concern has become more acute since Sept. 11.

Even before the election, Peter F. Vallone, the speaker of the City Council who had been eliminated from the mayor's race in the primary, was already planning the transition, inviting the winners of the primary to an informal lunch with his staff at City Hall. Wearing name tags, the hopefuls circulated and schmoozed in the Council's committee room, sipping sodas, eating sandwiches and putting names to faces as if they were at a freshmen mixer. But now that the new Council has been elected (two new members, replacing councilmen who vacated their seats early, have already begun work), preparations have gone into hyperdrive.

James E. Davis, an incoming councilman from Brooklyn, described the formal orientation as "that thing that went on for eight and a half hours, where you felt rushed on through from room to room like cattle."

"They brought out thousands and thousands and thousands of pages and put them in front of us," he said. "Each one of them had 15 minutes to throw a whole lot of information at us, and there's just no way that you can really learn a whole subject in that amount of time."

Mr. Davis saw the orientation as an opportunity, at least in part, for the central staff members to demonstrate their usefulness. He said he has been spending much of his prep time filling a notebook with advice from Mary Pinkett, whom he is succeeding. "This new class that's coming in, we mean to run the government," he said. "When we say we want a full partnership with the mayor, we mean business."

Eric Gioia, an incoming member from Queens, said that he has been spending time ordering civics books from Amazon.com and trying to decide how he is going to spend his "intellectual capital."

After the myopia of campaigning, he said, it was good to spend time around his new peers. "You've been so focused on your district, block by block, E.D. by E.D.," he said, referring to election districts. Now, he said, he realizes how every district is facing the same problems, like "how much the budget's going to stink."

Helen Foster, who is taking over the Bronx seat occupied by her father, Wendell, said that she has been working primarily with him and his staff to make the transition. Bill DiBlasio, who will represent Cobble Hill in Brooklyn, said that he has been spending a lot of his time talking to advocates and local organizations about their interests.

But many say that they are also busy attending frequent meetings of their borough delegations or, in the case of more than a dozen newcomers, meetings of the Fresh Democracy Council, a caucus determined to amend the rules of the Council to siphon power away from the speaker and toward the committee chairmen. They are concerned, they say, with choosing the speaker, because with a Republican in the west wing of City Hall, he or she will be the main spokesman for the Democratic Party.

But the rules and procedures are complex; it is crucial, longtime officials repeatedly say, that members understand the process so they can influence it in the ways they wish.

For example, because in many instances the Council's power is limited to a simple yes or no vote, depending on how a measure is worded, voting it down is not always tantamount to killing it — a twist that the current administration has been able to use to its advantage.

So a recent Friday morning found about a half dozen newcomers sitting around a City Hall conference table piled high with thick binders and volumes of sample budgets, revenue estimates and deficit projections amid the coffee cups. Poking his head into this budget session, Bill Perkins, a councilman from Harlem who is one of only 13 returning members and a candidate for speaker, joked that he wanted to sit in. "I'm a freshman too," he said, laughing. "I want to make sure I'm as smart as they are."

The members, who would later be briefed on the legislative process, codes of conduct, land use, human services and the environment, were learning not only what their powers were, but also where they ended

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