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Now It's His Bug Problem

Bloomberg inherits system plagued by high-tech gremlins

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Michael Bloomberg, who made a fortune peddling data terminals, will inherit a bundle of technological troubles when he becomes mayor next month — with limited funds to fix them.

While the high-tech revolution made Bloomberg rich, it has brought the Giuliani administration some of its poorest management moments in eight years, as costly new projects stalled and old systems sputtered.

One month after the self-made billionaire successfully sold voters his can-do problem-solving image, Bloomberg's handlers are too guarded to bare specific plans or strategies or make any promises of success.

Political aide William Cunningham said, "Part of the transition process involves discussions of whether you use different executives to look at the particulars, or do you get one overview.

"We'll consult people who are in government now, who have knowledge of the flaws in the system. All the myriad systems will be reviewed to see if there's a way to improve them in the context of everything else that needs to be done in the city."

One approach may involve combining computer networks from different agencies, or within agencies, for efficiency's sake, Cunningham said. The city faces a $4-billion operating deficit for the fiscal year beginning July 1, along with an increasing debt load that could deter borrowing for new high-tech capital projects.

A former colleague of the mayor-elect who declined to be identified said it is just the kind of challenge Bloomberg is prepared to meet.

In some of the current administration's more forgotten rhetoric, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his team spoke frequently of improving services through computers as he prepared to take over City Hall amid projected deficits in 1993.

Since then, the administration has been technologically challenged on several fronts.



AP File Photo

Michael Bloomberg, left, must tackle technological issues that have baffled Rudolph Giuliani's administration.

In August, for example, Comptroller Alan Hevesi declared that the city Department of Health wasted as much as $10 million on a failed project to automate the issuance of death certificates.

"This is an example of government at its worst," said Hevesi, then a Democratic candidate for mayor. "Six years after the funeral industry first presented the city with a plan for an electronic death registration system and two years after DOH began developing it, the agency finds itself back at Square One."

The Health Department, instead of drawing on the experience of New York state and New Jersey in developing death certificate software, contracted independently with IBM for a system that crashed when it was tested, officials said. In January, the department issued a new request for proposals to develop a new system.

This fiasco was no isolated case. As other documents showed, a major Fire Department project dragged on through both of Giuliani's four-year terms.

As reported in Newsday, attempts to complete a modern fire-dispatch system, costing more than $13

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