

# Good News Messenger to NY City Council

By Barbara Bedway

**S**IGNS OF LEGISLATIVE LIFE HAVE been detected in New York City's sleeping body, the city council. For years it was the tacit duty of a Democratic council member to rubberstamp the mayor in this one-party city, and if the council had little power as a governing body, individual members could acquire power by voting the party line. But "the almost irrelevant city council," as Jack Newfield and Paul DuBrul described it in *The Abuse of Power*, is slowly undergoing a transformation with newly elected members like Ruth Messenger, who had no political club backing and who spent more than 200 hours on the campaign trail standing in front of subway stations and organizing building-by-building on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Less than six months into her first term, Messenger has provoked rare criticism for a politician: "She is completely dedicated to the poor," complained one angry brownstone owner in her district. Her strongest critics are those who wish she would let up a little, especially on the issue of housing. In the past the council has voted rent hikes for rent-controlled buildings, but Messenger has been aggressively challenging that.

In the next year, New York City will take title to more than 100,000 dwelling units that have been abandoned by their landlords, often leaving the tenants without services or security. The municipal government has become the largest slumlord in the city. When ten housing groups from around the city came to Messenger to inquire about their new landlord, the city, she brought in other council members and groups and formed the task Force on City-Owned Property. They concluded that "the massive management problem" was also "an opportunity for creative housing and neighborhood action." Now, the broadened coalition of 23 tenant and community groups (like Interfaith Adopt-a-Building) work with elected officials to develop options for tenant and community management. A campaign is underway to advise people what to do when their building becomes city-owned.

"Ruth wants to use her office as a liaison between grassroots, self-help groups and the government," said staff member Sandy Bayer. The flow of communication between her and these groups makes her seem less like a politician than a community activist who happens to have some political power.

## Women spark council reform.

But she works hard at her politics. The council used to be famous for its erratic meeting schedule and its confusing array of committees and bills. Most constituents wondered what a council member did to earn a \$20,000 salary. Messenger, along with councilwoman Jane Trichter, went line-by-line over the council rules, formed another Messenger coalition consisting of members from all the boroughs, and won 21 procedural changes that helped define committee jurisdictions and enabled the sponsor of a bill to demand a vote in committee on the legislation 120 days after introduction. A proposal for council members to control the council's operating budget of \$3 million lost, leaving it in the control of majority leader Tom Cuite. A member since 1958, Cuite cautiously admitted that these changes have "helped streamline the legislative machinery." After years of council inertia, it was a coalition of women who sparked this reform. And it didn't just happen to be women, acknowledged Messenger. Sometimes it's easier to work with women.



"I was impressed that there was a shared orientation among the women to social services and welfare issues. And that all the women members of the council are full-time. Before, a council member seemed delighted to have a part-time position where you just dropped in and picked up patronage for your community." But she is still dissatisfied with the mostly rubberstamp quality of the council as a governing body.

In a *Village Voice* article entitled "How the People of New York Lost Self-Government," Messenger and council member Sheldon Leffler castigated the mayor, the state legislature, and the city council for allowing the Emergency Financial Control Board, the city's fiscal monitor since 1975, to continue its reign as "an unnecessarily intrusive, colonial, and long-lived control mechanism." When she and other council members drafted a resolution calling for a board more accountable to the public (the appointed body has never included a woman, black, Spanish-speaking or union member, and the majority of the members do not live in the city), it was shelved by the council leadership.

"The rules changes were easy, because we agreed on procedure, not substance. But I don't see a real will on the part of a majority of members to support the council as an independent body, separate from the mayor."

One morning recently she rushed into her office with a copy of the city's proposed budget open in her hands, and was immediately surrounded by staff members who gathered around her as she sat down. Her head of dark brown hair braided into a bun bobbed as she bent over the budget, and a finger stabbed rapidly at the columns of figures.

"Look for things that don't make any sense," she told the huddled staff mem-

## After years of city council inertia it was a Messenger coalition of women that finally sparked major reform.

bers. "\$130,000 for maintenance repairs? \$75,000 in independent contracts? Now who gets those?"

## Oklahoma same as New York.

Her solid training in looking for things that don't make any sense began in Oklahoma, where she ran the Child Welfare department at the age of 24, while her husband, Eli, was the chief medical officer at the Federal reformatory. "Oklahoma has as much to do with my being in politics as anything." She pauses to consider the connections between the Middle West and New York. "Living in Oklahoma gave me a tremendous opportunity for study of issues in racism, classism and oppression. Although blacks there have a very low social status they have a well-defined lower-working-class status and they do very well, because it's the Indians who are dumped on. It's all really the same as New York. People get screwed everywhere. In her office there are four maps of New York City, a favorite Lillian Hellman quote, and posters: posters from China, American Indian posters, posters

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