

GET UP, STAND UP: COUNCIL RANKED ON HUMAN RIGHTS

A new report looks well beyond potholes and street names to grade City Council members on their support for human rights. > *By Jarrett Murphy*

When the New York City Council voted last March on a bill imposing safety requirements on the recycling of electronic equipment, its members probably didn't think they were weighing in on a human rights issue. But according to the Urban Justice Center, they were—and now they're being graded on it.

The Center, a 24-year-old legal advocacy group for low-income people, last month issued a report that **ranked** all 51 councilmembers on their 2008 human rights records, according to a scoring system that considered voting record, sponsorship of bills and the opinion of advocates active in different issue areas.

It's the first such ranking issued by the Center—which noted in its report that the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** turned 60 years old in 2008. "It really has been a buildup of our work over the past few years talking to advocates and communities and realizing there's a bit of a disconnect: There's no real way for constituents to keep abreast of what is going on legislatively," says Ejim Dike, director of the Center's Human Rights Project. "The only information they get about their council members is from the council member."

While groups like the American Conservative Union and People for the American Way rate members of Congress, and the Sierra Club and National Rifle Association give scores to state legislators, City Council members tend to get ranked more often by the media on issues like office expenses and absenteeism. And if it seems odd to evaluate a city rather than a country in these weighty matters, consider that New York City's population of 8.3 million is comparable to that of Austria, Israel or Azerbaijan – all places that certainly have amassed human rights records.

The Urban Justice Center uses a broad definition of "human rights" in its report, explaining that "a range of human rights are recognized by the Constitution of the United States" and that "New York State's Constitution ... recognizes the right to an education, as well as a government's obligation to provide aid, care and support to the needy." For its part, the Universal Declaration recognizes a right to marry, to own property, to have an adequate standard of living and even to "rest and leisure." Dike says the Center consulted advocates in different issue areas to determine which pieces of local legislation to include in the analysis.

Some of the bills upon which the Center bases its score have more obvious human rights implications than others. The "Human Rights in Government Operations" bill, which requires city agencies to conduct a human rights analysis of their policies – but hasn't yet passed – has a clear connection. But the Council's decision in November to approve the Willets Point Development Plan, a rezoning that will result in the removal of existing auto-repair shops and other business from the "Iron Triangle" in Queens to make way for new development, is a more interesting pick. "It's really an issue of displacing workers from their places of work and has the potential of robbing them of their livelihood," says Dike, who says the problem extends to other development projects around the city, from Coney Island to Harlem. "If you don't have people advocating for workers, small businesses, tenants, there are no real laws protecting their rights and they don't have the resources that bigger businesses have. They get displaced without ceremony."

The electronic waste recycling bill had a human rights impact, Dike says, because improperly handled toxins from old computers and other electronic devices can have a disproportionate impact on low-income communities near waste collection stations.

The "defining issue of the year," according to the Center, was the Council's vote in October to extend term limits rather than calling a referendum on the issue or heeding the two earlier plebiscites in which city voters supported the current two-term restriction. "By circumventing a public vote on the issue, the bill violates the human rights principle that the basis of government authority is the will of the people," the report reads. Councilmembers

could receive only two grades on the term limits vote: An "A" if they voted "No" or an "F" if they voted "Yes." The term limits vote is one reason why members overall scored much higher on "advancing equality" than in the "democracy" category.

Councilwoman Letitia James from Brooklyn, a leading opponent of Mayor Bloomberg's move to extend term limits who also scored well in the environment and equality categories, ranks No. 1. (Click [here](#) to see all council members ranked by overall score.)

Brooklyn Councilman Simcha Felder came in last. In a statement, Felder spokesman Eric Kuo said: "Councilman Felder stands by his record and is proud of his advocacy for human rights. Disability access to voting booths, safety for public and nonpublic schools, and prevention of the financing for genocide in Darfur are just a few of the issues Councilman Felder has taken the lead on. Unfortunately he does not meet the arbitrary guidelines of this group."

Other notable rankings include Tony Avella of Queens, the insurgent mayoral candidate, who nabbed third place; Eric Gioia, the public advocate hopeful from Queens, who placed 17th; and David Yassky from Brooklyn, whose attempt to craft a compromise on term limits fell flat, putting him in 30th place – tied with Larry Seabrook, the Bronx member who chairs the Council's civil rights committee.

Dike says only five members responded to the center's survey, reflecting what she sees as a perception on the Council that human rights is an abstract issue having little to do with the business of running a city. "That's one of the other goals of this report, to start putting it in the minds of people that yes, these bread-and-butter issues that we talk about everyday are actually human rights concerns," she says.

Sometimes council members wade into more traditional human rights territory. In 2006, the Council passed a resolution supporting "Save Darfur Day." A year earlier, 18 members signed on to a resolution "urging the U.S. government to immediately commence an orderly and rapid withdrawal of U.S. military personnel from Iraq." The council has also considered resolutions and bills dealing with human rights in Burma, Bangladesh, Colombia, Iran, Israel and elsewhere.

Occasionally, the council's international interests cause controversy, such as when Brooklyn Councilmember Charles Barron in 2002 invited Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe—widely considered one of the worst human rights offenders currently in power anywhere—to visit City Hall.

Barron argues that criticism of Mugabe, who has ruled Zimbabwe since 1980, did not begin until his government in 2000 backed a sometimes violent campaign to reallocate land from white farmers—whose holdings were a remnant of colonialist conquest—to black citizens. An earlier system of land reform ended in 1997 when the British government discontinued funding. Since 2000, however, Mugabe has been criticized less for his actions against white farmers than for oppression of black opponents.

Barron, a passionate opponent of the term limits extension, ranked No. 2 on the Urban Justice Center list. Dike says the focus of the rankings was confined to city legislation in 2008, and that the advocates the center consulted did not raise international issues.

Closer to home, Queens Councilman Hiram Monserrate is currently facing felony charges stemming from an accusation that he assaulted his girlfriend. Monserrate has pled not guilty to the charges. As the Universal Declaration points out at Article 11: "Everyone charged with a penal offense has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defense."

On the Center's ranking, he placed No. 6. Monserrate, a former police officer who was elected to the state Senate in November, voted against the term limits change and managed to get affordable housing requirements written into the Willets Point plan.

Dike says the Urban Justice Center hopes to create a website to provide more information behind the rankings, and in future years to score council members on how their efforts modify legislation for the better or worse. They plan to release their next rankings in September—just before the election, or, as Dike calls it, a "back-to-school

issue."

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