

# THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

Davis Kennedy/Publisher & Editor

Chris Kain/Managing Editor

## Budgetary missteps

The D.C. Council was seemingly on the right track.

Back in February, Council Chairman Vincent Gray had highlighted the District's diminishing reserves — which plummeted from \$1.6 billion in 2005 to \$920 million in 2009. A hearing on the just-completed audit of the District's finances made clear that the District had just 18 days of working capital on hand, far below the one month's to two months' worth that industry standards suggest.

When Mayor Adrian Fenty proposed a 2011 budget that relied on spending another \$165 million from the District's savings account, it seemed evident from the earlier discussion that the legislature would reverse the tide.

Regrettably, that didn't occur — even though Mr. Gray earlier told members of the D.C. Chamber of Commerce that further reducing the reserves “would put us in a precarious position.”

The D.C. Council found enough spending cuts to avoid many of the unpopular hikes in fees and fines that the mayor had proposed. But the adopted budget continues to rely on reserve funds.

We find ourselves in agreement with Ward 2 Council member Jack Evans, who cast the sole dissenting vote on the budget. Mr. Evans — the longtime chair of the Committee on Finance and Revenue — noted that his colleagues had “pushed the hard decisions to next year” by relying on too many one-time fixes.

To its credit, the council did make a number of laudable adjustments to the budget. The council increased the facilities allotment for charter schools, restored funding for the Sustainable Energy Utility, and reduced spending on vacant positions throughout the government. The council rejected the mayor's proposed increase in some parking-meter rates to \$3 per hour, and it found a way to preserve street sweeping without raiding the Anacostia River cleanup fund. The council also did the right thing in applying the sales tax to soft drinks in order to fund the recently enacted Healthy Schools Act.

The positives, however, are undermined by the fundamental failure to protect the reserves. This decision has put the city in a precarious position. As Mr. Gray told the chamber, “If we don't address this now, there is a real possibility of a control board coming back.”

## DCRA bungling

The Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs has shown signs of reform in recent years, but a recent flap in Woodley Park has us withholding congratulations.

Residents balked when they learned that the city's zoning administrator had approved subdivision of a lot at 2910 Garfield St. The site isn't quite big enough to be split into two plots under zoning law, so the administrator approved a “minor deviation” to allow developer Zuckerman Partners to build two multimillion-dollar houses on the lot.

Neighbors said the houses would be out of character with their leafy neighborhood, and they announced plans to lodge an appeal.

They assumed that a stop-work order issued by the city would prevent work in the meantime. But on May 21, workers arrived at the site to map tree routes. Apparently, there was no such order.

“And we can't get to the bottom of why I was sent an e-mail from DCRA saying a stop-work order was put on the property on May 4,” said 29th Place resident Paul DiVito.

Perhaps that e-mail was a mistake. But if so, agency officials should have quickly moved to explain themselves. Instead, residents say they have not heard anything since a mid-May meeting arranged by Ward 3 D.C. Council member Mary Cheh.

Proper communication is essential to engendering public confidence in city agencies, and the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs is inspiring no such comfort in this case. Officials should act quickly to explain the contradictions, and work with residents to respond to their complaints.

## A stumble on streetcars ...

D.C. Council Chairman Vincent Gray is known as a friendly, thoughtful man. He's a politician who is willing to listen to many people and many sides of an issue before making up his mind.

In other words, he's the opposite of the leader Mayor Adrian Fenty is often criticized as being.

In fact, Gray is so deliberative that your

Notebook, among others, has observed that he is too inclined toward thinking rather than acting. Of course, Gray and his mayoral campaign would disagree. But

“ponder” is a word that comes easily to mind when reviewing his leadership style.

So what happened with the streetcar debacle?

Last week, as the D.C. Council was lurching toward a budget vote, Gray surprised many by derailing nearly \$50 million in spending for the city's new streetcar system. It was a decision apparently reached in the middle of the night.

There were no public discussions, no hearings, no telephone calls to test the waters.

But there was blistering outrage when others found out.

Ward 6 Council member Tommy Wells went ballistic. That's saying a lot for the usually genial, earnest council member. Ballistic. Wells. He fumed at Gray, saying the city could lose tens of millions in federal transportation funds.

But Wells was back to calm after a storm of e-mails, tweets and texts rained upon the chairman and the council and they restored the funds.

“I'm very grateful for the leadership of my colleagues to restore these funds,” Wells said in a formal statement. “This is an investment that connects east and west of the Anacostia River with the next generation of public transportation.”

The real question is whether Gray's derailing of the trolley system will come back to haunt him in his race against Mayor Fenty. The Gray decision wasn't deliberative, inclusive or careful.

David Alpert of the blog Greater Greater Washington had helped spread the word that the Gray gambit was sinking the streetcars.

“Our report was very quickly picked up and reconfirmed by many other blogs,” Alpert reported. He wrote that blogs including “DCist, We Love DC, Prince of Petworth, Frozen Tropics, The Hill Is Home, H Street Great Street, Life in Mount Vernon Square, the Sierra Club's Streetcars4DC, and many more asked people to call Gray's office.”

Chairman Gray was left defending his decision. He said he favors streetcars but thought the Fenty administration lacked a clear understanding of how to proceed with conflicting information about track work and design. Gray said he thought a one-year delay would allow the city to get its plans in order.

The Fenty campaign already is pointing to the flash funding flap, saying it's an example of how Gray can get mired in bureaucracy and not see the big picture.

“So much for transparency and working well

with others,” scoffed one senior member of the Fenty campaign.

■ **Next stop for streetcars?** The campaign trail. Expect to see the streetcar issue being used against Gray in the H Street NE corridor. People have put up with a lot to get that street rebuilt and tracks laid for the streetcar. Gray should hope that the residents and businesses over there don't decide to ride him

out of town (or at least contention) in the upcoming primary.

■ **Segraves salvo.** WTOP reporter Mark Segraves was emcee at a Ward 6 Democrats

awards event last week. He didn't miss a beat with the streetcar flap.

Chairman Gray arrived late to the festive and well-attended event.

“Vince Gray just got here,” Segraves quipped. “He was late because he was waiting for the streetcar to pick him up in Ward 7.” The tables of Fenty supporters in the room howled and applauded. Gray frowned.

But Segraves, being the balanced journalist he is, made fun of Fenty, too. The mayor had left before Segraves got in his dig.

“Mayor Fenty was here but had to leave,” he deadpanned. “He ran out of quarters for the meters.” The room erupted. And with this one, Gray joined in the laughter. But the Fenty folks boomed.

■ **Rivlin for Gray.** As we were packing to go out of town, we learned that former financial control board chair Alice Rivlin was among a group hosting a fundraiser for Gray at her Ward 3 home.

Rivlin, a resident scholar and leader at the Brookings Institution, told NBC4 in an e-mail why she's supporting Gray.

“I have great respect for Chairman Gray,” Rivlin wrote. “He is a thoughtful leader who understands the District's needs, is fiscally responsible and, as mayor, could forge consensus with the council.” In 2006, Rivlin supported Marie Johns for mayor.

■ **The Post endorsement?** Some folks are already anxious to see who will get The Washington Post endorsement. Some believe Fenty is a certainty. Four years ago, The Post wrote about Fenty's inexperience but said, “There is reason to believe that his achievements will outweigh his missteps and that the District will be changed for the better as a result of his mayoralty.”

To shake The Post's position, Fenty would have to make a few more missteps. But Gray has to do better than the streetcar mess to make his own case for being mayor.

■ **Campaign watch.** The next big event is the June 10 fundraising report. Fenty will show he still has plenty of money. It'll be up to Gray to show that he's making an earnest effort to be competitive. No one expects Gray to have bundles of money, but he has to have enough to show that his campaign has momentum. How much is that? We'll know it when we see it.

*Tom Sherwood, a Southwest resident, is a political reporter for News 4.*



### TOM SHERWOOD'S NOTEBOOK

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### In Palisades, a little Safeway that could

In our judgment, the staff of the MacArthur Boulevard Safeway is well-deserving of community recognition. The employees there provided a significant service to the community during the closing and reconstruction of the Georgetown Safeway.

As regular patrons of the

Georgetown store, during the reconstruction we shifted over to the MacArthur Safeway. This vintage Safeway was tighter in the aisles, but to our amazement it had virtually everything we needed.

In addition, the MacArthur Safeway had something even more valued and appreciated. Both in competency and spirit, the staff was impressive in how it met the demands of the rush of people into the quite-small space. Amazingly, the store was stocked to the gills. The staff,

ever gracious as we adjusted to the new store, personally escorted us to whatever items we requested.

Incredibly, the store never missed a beat during the record snowstorms of the past winter. Walking into the little store on those snowbound days, we found an amazingly well-stocked store with fresh produce and an ever-smiling and welcoming staff.

Hurray, with thanks and gratitude, for the little store that could!

**Ellen Baker and John Doolittle**  
*Georgetown*