

Fight for NYC's right to rule itself, Eric

On his inauguration day in 2014, I published an article urging Mayor de Blasio to restructure city government so we would be less dependent on Albany and more productive at home. There were — and are — two basic ways of doing this: persuading the Legislature to give New York City more control over our affairs and amending the City Charter to streamline and democratize our agencies and services.

To say that Mayor de Blasio had little success with Albany is an understatement. For someone who is a political operative in his bones, he seems to have never figured out how to deal with the governor or legislative leaders. Gov. Cuomo was obviously not a willing partner, but still, despite oneupmanship driving the political dynamic during those years, we expect our mayors to more successfully navigate institutional and personal obstacles. De Blasio didn't quite cut it.

Not that it would be easy under the best circumstances. After all, New York's dozens of cities and counties are creatures of the state and function in many important ways at Albany's behest. Yet there are some carve-outs in the law, for cities "over a million in population" (that would be NYC), or on specific, circumscribed issues, such as housing, schools, water and sewage responsibilities. So it is certainly worth a mayor's time and effort to obtain as much direct authority as possible.

De Blasio's use of the Charter amendment process was similarly disappointing, failing to implement the bold strokes we have seen before when commissions successfully initiated significant reform — for example in the 1930s (creating the City Council), the 1970s (giving local communities a role in city planning), and 1980s (creating an expanded and more powerful City Council, and instituting a world-class campaign finance program). In fact, during de Blasio's tenure, it was the City Council, not the mayor, that established a commission leading to the most important reform in years — an overhaul of our elections by instituting ranked-choice voting. His commissions had the power to revamp the entire Charter, but essentially suggested minimal reforms that, although worthwhile, did not address fundamental municipal governance. His latest commission's proposals, which we will vote on next November, address racial inequities; I wish he had done this eight years ago.

It appears that incoming Mayor Eric Adams is ready to grab the bull by the horns to re-make city government — to enhance the city's ability to control our resources, rein in our sprawling bureaucracy,

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BY JERRY GOLDFEDER

and put a halt to ethical breaches of the public's trust. As a former state senator, he knows Albany well enough to draw up an agenda to take additional control of the city's tax structure, our transit system, roads and airports and public development, for example. He should make that a priority in his first 100 days.

He should also appoint a Charter Revision Commission right off the bat — to reform our overlapping agencies, strengthen our ethics and lobbying laws, and transfer authority over municipal elections from the woeful Board of Elections to the independent, professionalized Campaign Finance Board, among other reforms.

Of course, the mayor has the power to improve city life even without the need for state legislation or a Charter commission. For instance, he can immediately direct his new corporation counsel to expand the rights and opportunities of New Yorkers by embracing the authority that has been traditionally under-utilized. The Charter gives the city's chief lawyer the "right to institute actions in law or equity" in any state or federal court "to maintain, defend and establish the rights, interests...or demands of the city ... or of the people" of the city.

This power to bring such affirmative litigation has been invoked in the past, but not nearly as aggressively as warranted. Think about what the city's lawyer can do — to protect and expand voting rights, secure affordable housing funds from the federal government, expand climate protection and flood controls, halt the presence of guns in our city, defend and expand workers' rights, and the like. An emphasis on more proactive legal action could make a world of difference in New Yorkers' lives. (This past April, the city did file a lawsuit against Exxon and other "Big Oil" companies for violating our consumer protection laws through false advertising and deceptive trade practices, but I wish Mayor de Blasio would have brought such cases more often.)

In sum, our new mayor can propose state legislation to empower the city, create a Charter Commission to reform our government, and use the city's lawyers to better our lives. I hope he does.

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