

10
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OUR OPINION

Where the money goes

Not-for-profit organizations provide important social and cultural services that fill voids left by the lack of government services, and enhance the communities they serve.

Many of these not-for-profits are bare-bones operations, staffed by dedicated and decent people who truly believe in the mission of their respective organizations and make the sacrifice of long hours at modest pay to achieve boldly visionary, often impossible goals.

Staten Island has been blessed with a wealth of these selfless folks, who eat, sleep and breathe their organizational mission to serve clients and/or the community as a whole. For the criticism they sometimes get, Staten Island would be a much poorer, much bleaker, much less interesting place but for their yeoman efforts.

It's for all those reasons that the not-for-profits have always held a special place in the scheme of things, particularly in a city that prides itself on its compassion and its cultural richness. And that special place has to some degree — some would say a great degree — exempted them from the close financial scrutiny imposed on other agencies and programs funded by the taxpayers' money.

In flush times, when the government wasn't required to pinch pennies, politicians competed with each other to funnel funds to these agencies, in part because they believe in them and partly in expectation of receiving "man-of-the-year" or some such honors at a dinner and reaping the accompanying public-relations benefits afforded by a public which unquestioningly supported these causes.

But the flush times are over for the foreseeable future, and with the city and state governments facing monumental deficits, all government expenditures, including for essential services, are

coming under review.

We think this critical review of expenditures is appropriate for all government-funded services, and appropriate especially for the not-for-profits, if only because they have escaped close scrutiny for so long.

Republican Councilmen Vito Fossella and John Fusco have introduced legislation in the City Council that would require not-for-profit groups with city contracts or receiving city funding to publish the salaries of all staffers and consultants each year in the City Record.

Councilman Jerome O'Donovan supports the measure, but would add provisions requiring the not-for-profits to follow city hiring guidelines, including those banning nepotism. To this list of concerns, we would add perks paid for out of not-for-profits' government funds.

Hearings on the measure will begin soon. As might be expected, many executives of not-for-profits insist that they're all for full disclosure, but claim the law is unnecessary and burdensome: The salaries of top staffers are on file at the several city agencies that oversee the various not-for-profit groups, say these officials. The councilmen counter that they shouldn't have to negotiate a bureaucratic maze to get this information; it should be readily available in the public record, and it should be full and complete information.

The Councilmen are right. While there is no evidence of widespread abuse and the majority of not-for-profits behave honorably, there are enough stories of taxpayer money being spent unwisely, wastefully and even extravagantly, and there is always the opportunity for unscrupulous people who pretend to be "doing the Lord's work" entering these fields for their own financial gain.

The full-disclosure initiative is a necessary precaution, and a fair requirement for anyone who is permitted to spend or is paid with the taxpayers' money. We would only hope that the not-for-profits were more eager to comply.