

Olympic Effort by Dan Jacoby

Let the games begin.

This fall, New Yorkers will once again go to the polls and choose a mayor, along with a city council, and several other less sexy positions. Because of term limits enacted several years ago, there are a number of extra openings. As a result, politicians, political wannabes, political operatives, political watchers and media hounds galore are jockeying for their piece of the political pie.

There are many, many issues at stake in this election. After years of wrangling, wheeling and dealing, our schools are still crumbling, while the powers in Albany are still defying court orders to give us the funding we need. After years of new and shifting taxes, rebates and spending cuts, the budget is still unbalanced. After years of posturing and shouting, often solely for the benefit of the television cameras, some union contracts are in good shape, while others are nowhere.

In short, this is another very important election. The result of this election will determine whether we can teach our children, clean our air, house our homeless, feed our poor, protect our police and firefighters, and much more. Yet with these and other serious issues at stake, what will this year's election be about?

It will be about whether we should have built a stadium for a football team, and for an Olympic games we probably won't get anyway.

This may sound like just another silly-season election, but the truth is that more is at stake than building a stadium. What's at stake is the way things get done – or don't get done – in government. What's more, everyone, from Mayor Bloomberg on down to every junior assistant flunky on every elected official's staff, knows it.

Mayor Bloomberg, along with his right-hand man, Daniel Doctoroff, know that this stadium scheme would never pass if the proper authorities – the City Council and the State Assembly and Senate – were allowed to vote on it. This scheme involves spending over one billion dollars, between direct expenses and tax breaks, on a project that will never pay for itself, and will louse up traffic and business on Manhattan's west side for decades. So they worked with Governor Pataki to cook up a method of pushing this scheme through without the people's representatives getting a vote.

And that's what this election should be all about.

Whoever is elected mayor this fall should be someone who promises to restore the decision-making power to the people, and to the people's representatives. Whoever is elected to the other positions should promise to support that effort. And next year, when we elect a governor and state legislature, the same "litmus test" should be used.

The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU has proposed a sweeping set of reforms. Recently, the Assembly enacted a few of these reforms (the Senate did – well, we don't know what they did, because they're keeping their proceedings secret). But even the most sweeping proposals don't touch the biggest corruption in New York.

Authorities.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the Port Authority, the Battery Park City Authority, the Long Island Power Authority, even something called the Dormitory Authority – the list goes on and on. These groups control transportation, power, housing, jobs, urban development, job creation, health care, and many, many other basic government activities. And these groups answer to almost nobody. In almost all cases, the governor chooses who runs them, how they operate, what they can spend, and what reports they file, with practically no public oversight.

Which is how this boondoggle of a stadium can be put over. Just create a new Stadium Authority, and nobody gets to have any input.

For now, the pressure is being put on Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, who actually has a veto, to stop the stadium from being forced down our throats. Whatever he decides, however, the election should center on reforming who controls our government. It should center not only on the Brennan Center's proposed reforms, but also a much more comprehensive overhaul of our city charter and state constitution.

The problem, of course, is that serious reform, on the scale proposed here, can't be summed up in a sound bite. It doesn't fit into a 15 second commercial. So rather than being a serious discussion of how to fix the dysfunctional way our city and state governments work – or don't work – this election will probably center on the Olympics.

So, let the games begin.

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