

Mayor Mike's 3rd term blues

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Last Updated: 4:57 AM, April 4, 2010

Posted: 1:03 AM, April 4, 2010

Four months into Mike Bloomberg's third term — amid a fiscal crisis, the threat from Albany cutting 18,500 city jobs, and of a growing roll call of top aides departing City Hall — Bloomberg appears to be a Mayor alone, his old guard falling faster than the new blood trickles in.

Earlier this week Bloomberg's longest serving and most loyal and powerful aide, Deputy Mayor of Operations Ed Skyler, announced that he would be leaving by the end of the month to run government relations for Citigroup, where he'll earn a reported \$1 million-a-year salary.

Skyler's departure came on the heels of Deputy Mayor Kevin Sheekey's March announcement that he would be assuming a lucrative top post at Bloomberg LP, as well as the departure of communications director James Anderson, who went to work for the Mayor's charitable foundation.

Bloomberg's sustainability guru and the architect of PlaNYC, Rohit Aggarwala, also announced this week that he will be following his wife to California after his April 10 wedding, where he'll start looking for a new job.

After years of loyally beating the drum for their boss, Bloomberg's top aides are now thinking first about what's best for them before weighing what fits City Hall's interests. In total, more than 15 high-level staffers and commissioners have announced their departure since Bloomberg decided to run for a third term.

"Once [the election] was done, I focused my attention on myself and what I wanted to do long term and where I want to be," Skyler told The Post. "One of the hallmarks of the Bloomberg administration is that there's been relatively little turnover. Now people are wondering about other things they might want to do with their lives."

Skyler, who was Bloomberg's first press secretary in 2002, has served as one of the Mayor's top budget and legislative negotiators. He has been involved in everything from hammering out agreements with labor unions to revamping the Buildings Department to enacting the Mayor's wide-ranging sustainability initiative, PlaNYC.

Political insiders said that the direction of Mike's third term depends, in a large part, on the temperament and natural interests in whomever the Mayor taps to replace Skyler.

"Mike Bloomberg has been very effective in attracting talented people and letting them thrive because he gives them autonomy," said NYU urban policy professor Mitchell Moss, who has served as a Bloomberg advisor. "You're not going to replace Ed Skyler, but you're going to get a different kind of quarterback."

Over the past eight years, Skyler has dedicated himself first and foremost to his boss. "I have spent so much time with [Bloomberg] that I knew how he thought, I knew what his values were, I knew what would cut muster and what would be laughed out of the room," Skyler said. "I just knew what his standards were."

His replacement will help set the agenda for a third term. Some political analysts said they expect the "new Skyler" to be a budget guru in the mold of Bloomberg's first Deputy Mayor, Marc Shaw.

"Over the time Bloomberg's been in office it's become less about big ideas than about competent management and moderate ideas at the agency level," said Andrew White, who runs the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School. "He'll be looking for someone with expertise in managing the budget [to replace Skyler]. That has to be the core of their agenda, given the financial situation."

The news of Skyler's departure was not entirely unexpected but sources said the mayor did not want to lose him. "Two deputy mayors leaving is a big deal," said White.

Although he has named four new commissioners since October, the Mayor is acting uncharacteristically mellow in his hard-earned third act.

Bloomberg, best known for pushing game-changing initiatives like a citywide smoking ban, a traffic-tax in Manhattan, or a takeover of the public schools, has spent the first months of his third term encouraging New Yorkers to return their Census forms, reacting to policies enacted in Albany and Washington and reconfiguring his philanthropic foundation. His last Big Idea, some argue, was to make permanent the traffic-free stretch of Broadway near Times Square.

"The problem with a third term is how to reinvent yourself so your legacy is intact," said political strategist Hank Sheinkopf. "We have yet to see what will happen."

Political strategists are split on whether Bloomberg's third term will include any big, out-of-the-box ideas or whether he will be hampered by a fiscal crisis and lame duck inertia.

"His background is that if you're not moving, you're dying," said his former communications director Bill Cunningham. "He'll use these departures as an opportunity to bring in new views and energy."

Even Skyler — who originally opposed Bloomberg's third term bid — said the Mayor didn't run merely to enjoy the trappings of elected office or to babysit the city.

"He's not the caretaking type," said Skyler. "The smoking ban didn't come up the first month of the first term, and PlaNYC didn't come up the first month of the second term. These things evolve. If you work for Mike Bloomberg, big ideas are part of the deal. He's an aggressive person and he's going to drive an aggressive agenda, and he's going to build off of his success in the first two terms and surpass it."

But Cunningham predicted a third term that would focus on initiatives already introduced.

"He's like Eisenhower in the Second World War, moving on a variety of fronts," he said. "He's staked out on health, education and the environment. There's already a broad three-front movement here. Some of the things they started were so large in scope that there's still plenty to do there, like PlaNYC. Just because it's been announced, it doesn't seem new and fresh but it's still a huge project."