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Mayor Denies Political Bid but Fuels Talk With Actions

By [DIANE CARDWELL](#)

Last week, [Michael R. Bloomberg](#), the New York City mayor, stood on a sunny public school terrace in Queens and told reporters that he was not running for president.

“I’m just going to be giving an energy speech in Houston on Friday and a commencement speech in Oklahoma Friday night,” he said, describing his national campaign-style travel plans. He added coyly, “I don’t know why you would think anything like that.”

So it goes with Mr. Bloomberg, who simultaneously rejects and stokes the idea that he might run for president, all the while sharpening his national profile and allowing behind-the-scenes machinations just in case he decides to make an independent bid for the White House.

Despite the denials — in Oklahoma City on Friday he said, “I have no presidential plans. I’m not running for president.” — Mr. Bloomberg, a multibillionaire unafraid to spend vast sums achieving his political goals, has increasingly fueled speculation that he will run, by doing things like retooling the Web site he used for his mayoral campaigns to promote his record in the public and private sectors.

And while aides say he has not been persuaded to mount a campaign, he has fashioned a second-term agenda for the city that is in many ways as national as it is local, focusing on broad issues like interstate gun trafficking, illegal [immigration](#), energy and environmentally sound growth.

He has also crisscrossed the country in search of a national audience, traveling in recent weeks to Ohio, Texas and Oklahoma to deliver sweeping speeches on policy and politics.

“He’s clearly looking at the whole country,” said Ed Ott, executive director of the New York City Central Labor Council, who is a member of the mayor’s Sustainability Advisory Board and attended a private dinner where Mr. Bloomberg spoke broadly about governing throughout the nation. “These trips, they’re not just trips — this guy’s probing. I think he’s genuinely interested in, ‘If I do this, can I have an impact?’ ”

Though Mr. Bloomberg’s travels and speeches have fueled much speculation about his political intentions — he has been featured recently in Time and on the covers of The Weekly Standard and Fortune — it is far from clear how they will play out.

Mr. Bloomberg has said privately that he is not interested in a campaign simply to make a point or to be a [Ross Perot](#)-like spoiler. Like Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), he would be in only to win.

For him to run — a determination he could wait on until early next year, after the major parties have selected their nominees — he would need to be convinced that the field was polarized enough to create an opening for his brand of moderate, pragmatic politics.

But for now, political analysts say, the mayor is aware that talk, and perhaps even excitement, about a Bloomberg candidacy can enhance his influence not only in the city, but also in the corridors of the State Capitol and Congress.

That is especially the case since Mr. Bloomberg will be forced from office by term limits at the end of 2009, said John H. Mollenkopf, executive director of the Center for Urban Research at the [City University of New York](#) Graduate Center.

“People who might not want to go along with the mayor’s program know that the clock is ticking and can wait him out,” Dr. Mollenkopf said. “Any lame duck needs a strategy for staying relevant, and what could be a better strategy than convincing people that you’re going to be a powerful political figure?”

At the same time, Mr. Bloomberg’s increased stature could help him in the future, whether in a quest for political office or in influencing policy as the head of the multibillion-dollar foundation he is establishing.

And at the very least, being considered presidential material is a great source of entertainment for a man with middle-class roots who got his start on Wall Street counting bond certificates in un-air-conditioned bank vault in his underwear.

Indeed, the mayor has acknowledged as much, conceding that the presidential rumors are flattering and helpful in attracting support for the city, given that he sees Washington as the key to many of the city’s problems.

“Anything that gets us attention so that we can promote New York City’s interest, which is what my job is,” Mr. Bloomberg told reporters in March.

“Whether it’s in getting us homeland security money, getting us federal government tax policy that helps New York businesses, whether it’s getting regulation that helps us survive and prosper — those are the kinds of things that, if they speculate about the presidency, and if it helps, I’d be derelict in my duty if I didn’t go and continue to use every advantage that I can to promote New York’s cause,” he said.

Already accustomed to the heady circles of the extremely rich, Mr. Bloomberg is now burnishing his reputation among important policymakers and enjoying access to federal lawmakers. This week, he is set to share a stage with former President [Bill Clinton](#) as a host to international city leaders at a global climate conference in New York.

Whenever Mr. Bloomberg visits Congress, said his chief spokesman, Stu Loeser, lawmakers stop in the halls to say hello or ask why he is there, offering an opportunity to press for the city's needs.

"People are interested in what he has to say," Mr. Loeser said. "He's a gifted salesman who, when he has three points to make and two minutes to make them, he makes them."

Although some government insiders say that Mr. Bloomberg has seemed distracted from governing this term, flitting from town to town and policy issue to policy issue, many officials and advocates who work with the administration disagree and say there is little downside to the mayor's focus outside the city.

"When it comes to issues like housing and gun control and national health, mayors have always spoken out," said City Comptroller [William C. Thompson Jr.](#), who is seen as likely to seek Mr. Bloomberg's office in 2009. "I think it helps keep New York City at the forefront of an urban agenda."

At the same time, others wonder if the mayor's national ambitions, whether for the presidency or for influence, are guiding policy decisions at home.

Recent changes to a planned overhaul of the school budgeting system were widely viewed among education advocates as a concession to avoid a high-profile battle with the teachers' union that could damage Mr. Bloomberg's growing national reputation as a reformer.

"The shift on the school issue was so dramatic, so out of character, so sudden that it really did raise a question other people had been raising," said Michael Gecan, an organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation, a group active in education, community development and labor issues. "We know of no local reason why he would have done that, and we hope that it's going to be reversed."

But Mr. Loeser said that Schools Chancellor [Joel I. Klein](#) had decided that the change, which will make it harder to redistribute experienced teachers to more troubled schools, would be fairer.

Still others see Mr. Bloomberg's activities as capitalizing on a shift in attitudes across the country as Americans developed more positive feelings about New York after Sept. 11, a shift that former Mayor [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) is tapping into in his bid for the White House.

"New York is now a city that people identify with," said Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at [New York University](#) who has advised Mr. Bloomberg. "And so the mayor of New York has a different kind of audience now."

Cheryl Camp contributed reporting.