

## Testing... Testing...

BY MARK SEGRAVES

It's been a month of tests for the elected leadership of the District. And two of the tests proved to be excellent windows into the inner workings of the mayor and the DC Council.

### TEST # 1

The blizzards of 2010 would have been a daunting task for any mayor, and in many ways the Fenty Administration had some real success. But just like the overall scorecard for the mayor, his handling of 40 inches of snow had its rough spots.



Councilmember Kwame Brown demonstrates his commitment to constituent services in Hillcrest during the recent "snowpocalypse." Photo: Michael Price.

The District's initial response to the first storm was by all accounts above average. The first storm hit on a Saturday; by Sunday morning many of the area school districts had announced they would be closed on Monday. It was a no brainer. Except in the District. By 5 p.m. on Sunday, every school system in the region had announced they would be closed. DC still hadn't made a decision. At 5:36 p.m. the announcement was sent to parents and the press. DC schools would open two hours late.

The news set off a firestorm of angry parents, the teacher's union called it "irresponsible," the neighborhood listservs were on fire. Reporters frantically called

school officials and contacts in the Fenty administration. As is typical for Team Fenty, calls and e-mails went unreturned. WTOP traffic guru Bob Marbourg went on the air and asked, "What is the mayor thinking?"

Three hours later, at 8:35 p.m., a second press release went out. DC schools would be closed, but administrative offices would be open. No explanation was offered for the change or for why employees were ordered to report to work. At a press briefing the next day, Fenty refused to say what made him change his mind about opening schools. "I prefer not to tell the public what I'm thinking and instead tell them what I've decided," Fenty explained.

The schools remained closed for the next week, the federal government was closed for several days, Metro was not running, but Fenty ordered DC employees to show up for work. It was, like many of Fenty's mistakes, a public relations blunder. Instead of taking a page from the Karl Rove playbook and setting expectations low and delivering high, Fenty acted like the snow was no big deal and set expectations way too high.

In the end, when the snow just overwhelmed the plows, the public was outraged. But let's not forget, residents were already getting tired of Fenty before the snow. Poll numbers showed him in the low 40 percent approval ratings and trailing Vince Gray in a mayoral match up. So the snow just gave people one more reason to dislike the mayor.

At the March 2 DC Council legislative session, Councilmember Tommy Wells (Ward 6) wanted to introduce legislation that would have forgiven about \$200,000 in parking tickets issued during the blizzard. Wells said people weren't given proper notice that the snow emergency was going into effect.

"There was a lot of confusion in the communication during the storm," Wells told his colleagues at their monthly breakfast meeting. He was right. At one of Fenty's daily press briefings during the snow week, Fenty announced a snow emergency would take effect the next morning at 9 a.m.

He misspoke. The press release that had been handed out clearly read the snow emergency would take effect at 7 a.m. A reporter asked him to clarify. He reiterated 9 a.m. His staff began to scramble, trying to get his attention, whispering in the ears of the agency heads who stood behind the mayor. But nobody was willing to tell Fenty he had made a mistake.

An hour later, a new press release went out stating the snow emergency was now set to take effect at 9 a.m.

## TEST # 2

The members of the DC Council have finally said enough is enough to Councilmember Marion Barry (Ward 8). The former mayor has been accused of steering government contracts to his former girlfriend, demanding a kickback and then trying to impede the investigation into the matter. For that the DC Council took a very rare step. They sanctioned one of their own.

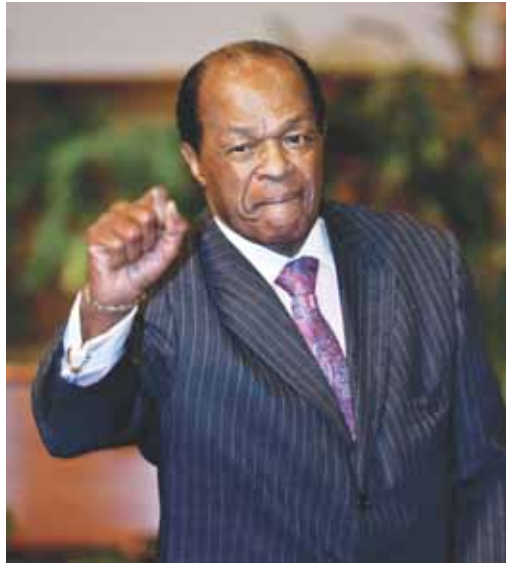
In a 12-0 vote the councilmembers stripped Barry of his chairmanship of the Housing Committee and removed him from the powerful Finance Committee. In a separate vote they censured him as a way to publicly denounce his alleged misdeeds. They also referred the matter to the US Attorney for criminal investigation.

The entire ordeal has been a serious test of leadership for Council Chair Vince Gray (At-Large). Months ago after the news broke about the girlfriend's contracts as well as some very questionable earmarks Barry arranged for his friends and employees, Gray asked former prosecutor and super lawyer Bob Bennett to conduct an independent investigation. Gray promised to make the Bennett findings public and to act on them.

Gray made good on his word. The Bennett report was presented to the council in an open hearing, and Gray implemented most, if not all, of Bennett's recommendations. Gray called a special session of the council and publicly admonished Barry for what he had done and then called for the vote.

Gray aired the council's dirty laundry in public, and the public and the council is the better for it.

But in a strange twist that is Marion Barry's life, it may also have been good for Marion Barry. First of all, censure is really meaningless, especially for Barry. It's just a wag of the finger. For most politicians it might be a bit embarrassing, but Barry doesn't embarrass easily. As for the removal from his committee chairmanship.



Councilmember Marion S. Barry vows to serve the residents of Ward 8 despite the censure of his colleagues. Photo: Andrew Lightman

That's almost a gift. A councilmember gets paid \$125,583 a year whether they chair a committee or not. And being the chair of a committee is a lot of hard work. Now Barry doesn't have to show up for all of those dreadful hearings, he can just kick back. Or as he put it after the vote, "This just gives me more time to work for the people of Ward 8."

While I'm quoting Barry, here are a few of his best lines from the speech he gave to his colleagues before the vote:

"I have a long history of great integrity, this council knows my character."

"After 31 years of being squeaky clean, why would I do this for a few thousand dollars?"

"The Bennett report reduces Marion Barry to a Southeast hustler."

## Jack Gets What Jack Wants

Councilmember Jack Evans (Ward 2) was working the room. During the council's monthly breakfast meeting Evans was taking individual councilmembers by the arm and walking them out of the room. Whispering in their ear. Something was up.

Turns out Evans likes cigars, and so do a lot of his rich friends. Each year he lights up with the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick at their annual St. Patrick's Day dinner at the Capitol Hilton as well as at the annual Fight Night, which benefits the Fight for Children organization, at the Washington Hilton. The problem is the ban

on smoking in DC was going to put an end to those great traditions.

No worries, as any good legislator will tell you, laws were not made to be broken; they were made to be amended. Evans, a great legislator, introduced emergency legislation, the Special Event Exemption Emergency Act. Sounds important. The bill gives hotels that have ballrooms that seat 500 people or more a once a year exemption for cigars only.

Since it was offered as emergency legislation, it needed 9 out of 13 votes. When the roll was called, Marion Barry voted in favor of the bill. The bill was about to pass 9 to 4. But Barry spoke out, "Mr. Chairman, I'd like to change my vote." The bill was dead, Evans was shocked, he was livid. He sprang into action knowing exactly what he had to do. He needed one of the "no" votes to ask for reconsideration and then change their vote.

First he went to Barry, then to Yvette Alexander (Ward 7), then to Phil Mendelson (At-Large) and Kwame Brown (At-Large). Back and forth, almost frantic, Evans paced the dais. A few minutes later Barry, spoke out again, "Mr. Chairman." A new vote was called, and Barry switched his vote for a second time, and Alexander joined him. Evans and his buddies get to keep their smokes.

## One Final Observation

Once a month, the mayor is scheduled to have breakfast with all 13 members of the council. The mayor usually cancels or just sends staff. When Fenty does show up, it's the one of the rare times the legislative branch and the executive sit down across the table from each other. For some councilmembers, it's the only time they get to be face to face with the mayor.

So when they do meet, you might expect a lot of important topics to be discussed like the rising unemployment rate, the \$200 million budget deficit, the AIDS epidemic, or perhaps the blizzards. You would be wrong. At the March meeting they talked about downsizing the security staff for the Wilson Building and nothing more. ★