

SAVING HEALTH CARE

Councilman signals support for retirees

Dinowitz has yet to specifically oppose benefits switch before the city council

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Hundreds of retired city workers rally outside City Hall last Wednesday to oppose the city's ongoing effort to switch them onto a new healthcare plan.

SACHI MCCLENDON



“

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ERIC DINOWITZ, COUNCILMAN

By Sachi McClendon

Retirees who face a cap on what the city government pays for their supplemental health care plan are frustrated and angry over what they call a switch to “an inferior plan.”

Retirees hollered at council members as they made their way onto the grounds of city hall for a bi-monthly meeting at a rally on Oct. 12, saying that they would come after any council member that supports the switch. “If we don’t get it, vote them out,” the crowd chanted.

But what of the council member whose district covers much of greater Riverdale? Well Eric Dinowitz, so far, hasn’t explicitly stated his position on the proposed legislation, but it appears that he is leaning toward the retirees.

“I want to make this as simple as possible: You were made a promise, and I’m not going to support anything that cuts your health care,” the councilman said at an Oct. 13 Community Board 8 meeting.

This was the first time Dinowitz hinted at his position on the matter. When *The Riverdale Press* first reached out regarding the proposed legislation in

September, his office was out for Rosh Hashana. The councilman did not return multiple requests for an interview after the holidays.

He has been kept abreast of the situation: In September the councilman took part in a meeting with around 30 city retirees, almost all of whom are his constituents, worried about the fallout that would come from the passage of the legislation.

The rally came soon after union leaders and Mayor Eric Adams' administration agreed to request city hall pass a piece of legislation that would effectively force retirees to either join the new plan or begin paying for their own supplemental benefits, as New York Focus first reported.

“No matter what union you were from, no matter what agency you were with ... we wanted all of you to stand together to be here today to say ‘let’s do this together.’ And let the city council know that we stand here as a unit,” said Marianne Pizzitola who organized the rally. It was designed to pressure the city council not to vote in favor of this proposed legislation that has not been introduced to the council yet.

Right now, the city must pay for the entire cost of health care benefits for city employees and retirees up to a cap, which is set at \$925 per month.

The draft version of the bill seeks to give the city and the Municipal Labor Committee, which negotiates on behalf of many city worker unions, the power to lower that cap for both retirees and current workers.

Dinowitz “was very sympathetic,” said Allen Frazer, a city retiree who attended that September meeting. “

He said he’s going to be in this position someday. He’s been a school teacher working for the board of education for 10 years. His whole life is essentially working for the city. He wouldn’t make any commitment though about the legislation.”

Dinowitz’ legislative director Adam Staropoli equivocated when further pressed by constituents in email.

“The councilmember was presented with a compelling case at the (Sept. 23) meeting and I can ensure you that he hears you (and everyone) loud and clear,” Staropoli wrote, according to emails reviewed by *The Press*. “As you’ve said,

there is currently no legislation introduced in the Council pertaining to this. Nonetheless, please know that this issue is a top priority for our office.”

Dinowitz is in a tight spot as his district is home to many retired city workers. Twenty percent of Community Board 8’s population is 65 or older, according to 2015 city health data.

On the other hand, there are powerful forces working against them. First is the Adams’ administration which is keen on amending the charter, as it says it would save the city hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

Then there are the municipal unions — or at least the union bosses — that are also working hand-in-glove with the mayor’s team. By reducing the health care costs tied to retirees, which are not union members, the amendment would help pay for the benefits for current workers.

The fact that several municipal unions are working against the retirees, many of whom are former union members, did not sit well with last Wednesday’s crowd.

“We have a couple of big union representatives that are conspiring with the city administration to take away our benefits,” said one retired firefighter. “I’m going to throw a word at you. It’s a very ugly, filthy, disgusting word. And you never want to be called this, but the word is scab,” he said referring to the union heads who worked on this proposal.

Nothing is set in stone, however. In fact, not all of the public sector union leaders are working in favor of this bill. Kyle Simmons, president of AFSCME Local 924, asked the council at the rally to consider their own retirement plans.

“I know it’s definitely going to impact me when I hang up my titles, so I need to be here,” he said to the crowd. “City council, you guys are retirees-in-training also. Whatever benefit we are going to get, you are going to get also. So I hope you all realize that.”