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LAWRENCE HARMON

The Boston Globe

Can the Menino machine save Boston, too?



Mayor Thomas M. Menino talks with J'Shaun Reddick, who is part of a group of local youths helping the city maintain foreclosed properties in Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan. (Bill Greene/ Globe Staff)

By Lawrence Harmon
Globe Columnist / November 7, 2010

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BOSTON MAYOR Tom Menino was feeling his Wheaties on election night. The 67-year-old mayor had cranked up his political machine as high as it goes and delivered the city in spectacular fashion for Governor Deval Patrick, who won 70 percent of the city's vote. "Tired machine, huh," Menino said sarcastically to no one in particular as a political aide flashed the votes cast by ward and precinct on a large screen in the Eagle Room at City Hall.

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These are tricky times for Menino. His relationship with the governor has improved greatly since 2006, when the mayor endorsed Patrick's opponent, then-attorney general

Thomas Reilly, in the Democratic gubernatorial primary. But warming relations don't make coins jingle at the city treasury. Boston budget officials estimate a \$70 million operating shortfall in the next fiscal year based, in part, on the projected loss of \$25 million in state aid. And that would come on the back of an \$81 million decline in state aid over the previous two fiscal years.

Menino should be well-positioned to meet this challenge. He's a popular, five-term mayor who is unlikely to run for a sixth term. He can afford to alienate some constituents by closing inefficient schools, libraries, and community centers if it's in the long-term financial interest of the city. But in recent months, Menino seems to be looking over his shoulder a lot. And that makes it harder for him, or

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anyone else, to see where he's going.

Consider the city's libraries. Menino has been a passionate supporter of neighborhood branch libraries, even at the expense of the main research library. That's why the words of library director Amy Ryan had such weight earlier this year when she proposed closing four of the city's 26 branch libraries to help close a \$3.6 million budget gap. Ryan and the library trustees made a good case that closures could be offset by expanding hours, programs, and collections in nearby branches and making better use of online services. Predictably, residents and elected officials in the affected neighborhoods protested. Unpredictably, Ryan retreated and cobbled together enough money to keep the libraries open and the neighborhoods quiet at least through March.

But that left a credibility gap along with a budget gap.

"Why would I support another initiative if they keep changing their minds?" asked Sam Tyler, the head of the nonprofit Boston Municipal Research Bureau. During a Bureau speech to business leaders in March, Menino had promised to take bold positions "that will position us for success for the next decade."

Similar confusion can be seen in the city's community centers. Menino seemed poised in the spring to break the hold of nonprofit boards that ran some community centers like private fiefdoms. The administration has contracted out some programs at a few of the poorly run centers. But Menino admits he hit "some rough spots," including community protests. And little progress is being made on the mayor's grand plan to shape schools, libraries, and community centers into "circles of promise" in the city's poorer neighborhoods.

The school situation is even more bewildering. The system is plagued by empty seats and poorly performing schools. Yet school Superintendent Carol Johnson's recent efforts to close three elementary schools and two high school programs met with a storm of protest by parents. Menino's appointed school board quickly pulled back to give Johnson more time to create an overall plan on how the cash-strapped system should deal with excess building capacity. But that raised immediate questions about why the administration would shake up so many parents without the benefit of a multi-year budget plan that addresses the closings in the overall context of school operations, including staffing and transportation.

This level of confusion and communication failure is uncharacteristic of the Menino administration. And it raises questions about just how committed Menino is to using his fifth term to challenge the status quo and put the city on firm financial ground.

While analyzing Patrick's victory on Tuesday night, Menino pointed to the governor's willingness to be straight with voters, even when it involved tough choices like cutting spending and raising taxes.

"Once in a while you have to challenge your constituents," said Menino. "That's what Deval did."

That's what Menino still needs to do. And the popular mayor must face the fact that pushing people in a direction they don't want to go — even for the greater good — is a lot harder than pulling out the vote on election day.

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