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## NEW YORK BUSINESS

## Scott Stringer Speaks Up. But Can He Stand Out?

*Biz groups prefer their careful comptroller to John Liu or Eliot Spitzer, but he's still forming an identity.*

By Andrew J. Hawkins

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Before he became the guy to scuttle Eliot Spitzer's comeback, Scott Stringer vowed to overhaul the obscure but influential office of city comptroller.

"It is time," he said at a Crain's Breakfast Forum in April 2013, "that we reimagine that office from top to bottom."

Mr. Stringer's first year in office established him as a highly functional but hardly transformational comptroller, appreciated less for who he is than who he is not: his nakedly ambitious predecessor, John Liu, who delighted in attacking the pro-business Michael Bloomberg; or Mr. Spitzer, who briefly gave business leaders an aneurysm before losing the comptroller's race to Mr. Stringer in 2013.

"His public statements have been measured," said Kathryn Wylde, president of the Partnership for New York City. "This means a lot to the New York business community, which is used to politicians who will sacrifice truth for a headline."

Mr. Stringer has sidestepped various PR landmines, staying silent during the recent dustup between Mayor Bill de Blasio and his Police Department, even as the spiraling controversy sucked in other elected officials, including Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, who was targeted by police union leaders.

No meetings with mayor

"In the Madisonian sense of checks and balances, the office of the comptroller often serves as the closest thing to a check on the mayor," said Kenneth Sherrill, professor emeritus of political science at Hunter College. But Mr. Stringer might have overplayed that role last August when he accused the mayor of rolling out his treasured prekindergarten expansion before the comptroller's office had approved all the contracts, noting that one vendor once had an employee accused of possessing child pornography, and another had failed to screen workers for child-abuse allegations. The mayor's program went ahead without a hitch.

The two Democrats have not met one-on-one since. Mr. Stringer acknowledged that no meetings have been scheduled, either.

"I don't count the number of events I go to with the mayor," he said over coffee at a Chelsea diner. "I don't think the public cares at all about that. They want to know that someone's watching out for the fiscal health of the city."

About half of New Yorkers approve of the job Mr. Stringer is doing, according to a December Quinnipiac poll, but a little more than a third don't know enough about him to have an opinion. It's a problem that many comptrollers have had.



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Mr. Stringer took on a heavyweight in his own party again last month, when he was the first city official to call on Sheldon Silver to step down as Assembly speaker. But he did so in a press gaggle, overshadowing the speech he had just given about his first-year accomplishments and second-year priorities.

Mr. Stringer touted his work as comptroller: his directive to track information-technology contracts and prevent another scandal like CityTime; his refinancing of city's debt; and ClaimStat, which tracks legal claims against the city, part of his effort to head off costly lawsuits.

As the city charter mandates, he has audited municipal services, initiating 38 in 2014. Mr. Liu started about 90 audits in his first year, but Mr. Liu said that Mr. Stringer appears to have completed more.

The work has "improved people's lives," Mr. Stringer said, adding that the "creative tension" with the mayor is an important aspect of his job as an independent watchdog.

But it's by no means the overhaul Mr. Stringer promised as a candidate for comptroller. Then, he said he would boost returns, cut adviser fees and better manage risk in the five funds that compose the city's pension system. The investments have become a major concern in recent years. Skyrocketing pension obligations have compelled the city to increase its annual contribution sixfold, while fees paid to investment managers have soared to about \$400 million a year, despite mixed results.

"He's functioned like every other comptroller," said John Murphy, a former executive director of the New York City Employee Retirement System and a critic of the city's pension governance since resigning after a scandal in 2005.

Mr. Stringer argued that he has outlined a plan to reform New York's \$160 billion pension fund, and that his approach to settling claims against the city has been fiscally prudent. He signed off on a \$17 million settlement for three wrongful-conviction claims, and is reportedly negotiating with the family of Eric Garner on its \$75 million civil-rights claim against the city.

"He's been aggressive in settling claims," said Mr. Liu. "Settlements are a tricky issue. ... Scott is carving his own path with regard to claim settlements. It seems like he's on the right track, but time will tell."

Carol Kellemann, executive director of the Citizens Budget Commission, praised Mr. Stringer's insistence that City Hall shift hundreds of millions of dollars of teachers' pay to the current budget.

"It may seem dry to the outside world," she said. "But from the point of view of doing the job that the comptroller is intended to do, I think he's been excellent at that."

Some experts say Mr. Stringer has done little to curb pension-fund investment fees; \$112 million was shelled out just to hedge-fund managers in the past 12 months.

Reform plan coming soon

Mr. Stringer said he expects to unveil a plan to streamline management of the five pension funds soon. Such a proposal was introduced and then abandoned by Mr. Bloomberg and Mr. Liu, who failed to line up the necessary union support first.



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Mr. Murphy, the former pension official, calls consolidation "smoke and mirrors" that won't reduce the fees paid to hedge-fund managers. But the reform would make the funds more nimble. Mr. Stringer said he is working behind the scenes to sculpt a plan that gets approval rather than just headlines.

His cautious approach could pay off: It's no secret that Mr. Stringer wants to be mayor. He was in the 2013 race for a time and has already opened a campaign fund for an undeclared office in 2017.

But even if Mr. de Blasio's mayoralty implodes or Mr. Stringer waits seven years for the post to open, crossing the street to City Hall from 1 Centre St. is not easy. The last comptroller to be elected mayor was Abe Beame in 1974, after which the city nearly went bankrupt.

"That was problematic," Mr. Stringer said, before adding, "Who knows what the future holds?"