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TIME TO CHOP JOBS

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A new report on the cost of New York City employees suggests strongly that layoffs may be unavoidable.

Let's face it: City Hall is growing broker and broker. Personnel expenses are burgeoning, yet little can be done about it in the short term - aside from chopping jobs.

The report - an invaluable contribution by the Citizens Budget Commission - shows just how out of control these costs have become.

Are you sitting down?

* The hit for an average firefighter, counting pay and benefits, is an eye-popping **\$186,464 a year**.

* A cop costs **\$164,045**.

* Average city employees run "only" **\$107,000** each, with some **\$38,000** of that for fringe benefits.

But the scariest part is how *fast* these costs have grown: In 2000 - shortly before Mike Bloomberg became mayor - the city's yearly tab was just **\$65,000** per average employee. So the cost has soared fully **63 percent** since then - *twice* as fast as in the private sector.

Most telling: Fringe benefits have nearly tripled - from **\$13,000** to **\$38,000** a year. Pension costs, in particular, are up a mind-numbing **700 percent** - from **\$2,530** a head to **\$20,333**.

The timing couldn't be worse: The Independent Budget Office says the city is slated to overspend revenues next year by **\$4.3 billion** - and **\$7 billion** the year after that.

And since City Hall, unlike the feds, can't print money, options are limited.

Certainly, pensions need to be contained. But that's largely up to the union-bought state Legislature - so don't count on it. (Reforms wouldn't likely kick in soon enough, anyway.)

Municipal employees should also be made to chip in for their health care - as most private employees do.

And city salaries, which have outpaced inflation, need to be frozen, if not *cut*.

Even so, with these out-of-the-ballpark personnel costs, Bloomberg & Co. will have no choice but to shed bodies.

Rolling back the head count to the level of eight years ago would mean nearly **7,000** fewer staffers. At **\$107,000** a head, that translates to savings of more than **\$700 million** a year.

Here's the bottom line: Public employees live in the same world as everyone else - a world in which pricey pay packages increasingly mean layoffs and workers must sacrifice to save jobs.

Unless city unions step up and offer dramatic givebacks (i.e., unless hell freezes over), pink slips are inevitable.

So be it.

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