

OTB Health Benefits Restoration Bill Gets Forwarded to Cuomo

By RICHARD STEIER

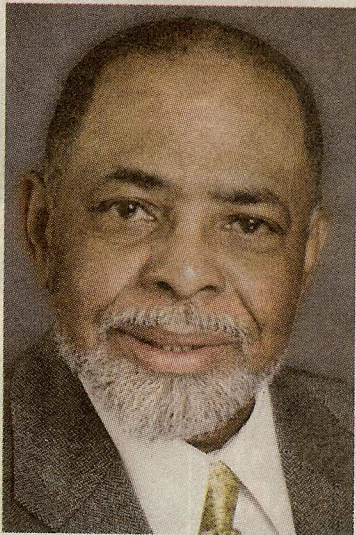
A bill that would restore health coverage for about 900 retirees of the New York City Off-Track Betting Corporation last week was passed by both houses of the State Legislature and will be forwarded to Governor Cuomo for final approval.

"It was a good stretch to get the health-insurance bill passed," said Leonard Allen, who as president of Local 2021 of District Council 37 represents most of the affected retirees.

Hasn't Crossed Finish Line Yet

Barry Yomtov, the head of the managers union, Teamsters Local 858, cautioned that Mr. Cuomo had not taken a position on the bill, and that even its relatively modest cost of

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LENNY ALLEN: 'A good stretch' but not a winner yet.

Legislature Votes to Restore OTB Health Benefits

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about \$4.5 million for the coming year could prove a problem.

The affected retirees, who are not yet old enough to qualify for Medicare, lost their government health coverage at the end of May, when a state appeals court ruled that neither the state nor the city was obligated to continue providing the benefit. After OTB was transferred from city to state control in mid-2008, the Bloomberg administration continued paying the health-benefit costs, contingent upon reimbursement by OTB.

When the city betting operation closed last Dec. 8 following the State Senate's rejection of a bill that would have allowed OTB to emerge from bankruptcy through major cost-cutting including the loss of more than half its 1,000-member workforce, city officials stated that they would discontinue health coverage at the end of the year.

DC 37 brought suit citing several reasons why the city or state should be compelled to continue the coverage and obtained restraining orders that kept payments coming while the case proceeded. Following the Appellate Division ruling, however, benefits were discontinued at the start of the Memorial Day weekend, forcing some retirees to explore purchasing health insurance on their own.

An Unkept Promise

"People are hurting now—it's really expensive to have to join COBRA," said Joel Finando, a Betting Clerk who had nearly 40 years on the job when operations ceased. "When we started working for OTB, they told us that if we stayed



BARRY YOMTOV: Hopes revival bill airs in summer.

with them, when we retired we'd have the benefit for the rest of our lives."

No action was taken on another, more-complicated OTB measure that would have permitted Catskill OTB to open parlors in the city. Mr. Allen said the Legislature's focus on issues like same-sex marriage and rent-regulation combined with a property-tax cap had kept this bill off "the front burner." Mr. Yomtov said disagreements in both houses of the Legislature about the bill's language had made it impossible to gain the necessary amendments to allow for action last week, and it never made it to the floor of either the Assembly or the Senate.

He expressed hope that it might be reconsidered during a Special Session that is expected to be called in August

to grant approval to a contract between the state and the Civil Service Employees Association that is awaiting ratification by the union's rank and file. Reopening OTB in the city even in a limited form, he noted, could save the state a significant amount of the \$15 million in unemployment benefits he estimated it is paying this year to the displaced workers, while helping to recoup some of the betting handle that has been lost since OTB shut its doors. It could also lead to Catskill OTB covering the retiree health costs.