

WEDNESDAY, JULY 29, 2026

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OPINION

jonetta rose barras: The DC Council's election year budget panders and jeopardizes

By jonetta rose barras Published on Jun 12, 2026 Last updated Jun 26, 2026

On Sunday, just two days before the DC Council voted unanimously to give initial approval to the city's nearly \$22 billion Fiscal Year 2027 Budget and Financial Plan, I asked Chair Phil Mendelson whether it would be fair to say that he and his colleagues were delivering an election year budget. After all, they were adding more than \$400 million in one-time funding to cover expenditures, which could objectively be characterized as the epitome of performative, patronizing fiscal management that risks the city's financial standing. Parts of the legislation, as he admitted, are clear examples of kicking the proverbial can down the road.

"When you hear long speeches from the dais, that's because of the election," said Mendelson, surrounded by staffers from the council's budget office who had gathered with him in his fifth-floor conference room inside the John A. Wilson Building to give a briefing to the press about his recommendations and the pending first vote on Tuesday.

For the most part, however, Mendelson rejected my characterization, saying that his recommendations represented the collective sense of the council and reflected massive public testimony in support of restoring spending cuts that had been proposed by Mayor Muriel Bowser as she sought to address a \$1.1 billion revenue shortfall. Among other things, following the chair's lead, legislators provided an additional \$39 million in FY 2027 to the Childcare Subsidy Program, bringing the total budget to \$153.2 million. They also added \$60 million to the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund, producing a total budget of \$72 million that's about the same as this year; and \$14.8 million to delay implementation of rules under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) that require the suspension of benefits to participants who have not satisfied employment requirements.

"None of that can be attributed to the election," added Mendelson during that Sunday briefing.

Except that by the end of the day on Tuesday after the council's votes on his recommendations on the FY 2027 Local Budget Act and the related legislation known as the FY 2027 Budget Support Act, which authorizes the appropriations, Mendelson — who is running unopposed for reelection in the Democratic primary on June 16 — blasted an email to supporters and potential supporters sharing information on the legislature's actions while requesting campaign donations.



(Photo by Kate Oczypok)

Ward 4 Councilmember Janeese Lewis George, a top mayoral contender, posted on X about many of the same matters that she has discussed on the campaign trail. She employed charts with deep purple backgrounds to highlight the council's funding decisions, elevating in the process spending consistent with her platform on childcare, housing and overall affordability.

"This budget isn't perfect, and there is still more work to do," Lewis George wrote, seemingly alluding to final consideration of budget legislation that will take place after the election. "But I'm proud we chose to protect residents and make lasting investments in communities across Ward 4 and DC."

Except that the areas touted by Lewis George, Mendelson and their colleagues as proof of addressing the needs of District residents are not long-term investments. In most cases, the money is only allocated in FY 2027, not the full four-year term of the financial plan.

DC Chief Financial Officer Glen Lee agreed to release nearly \$300 million the city had collected after legislators decided last year to disconnect or decouple various aspects of DC's tax code from the federal tax code in response to passage of President Donald Trump's so-called One Big Beautiful Bill. Credits that could have been realized on the local level by District tax filers were withheld as a result of that maneuver. A scaled-back decoupling provision in this year's budget will in effect restore the aspects that proved most contentious — namely, a tax exemption on income from tips and overtime, a credit for senior citizens, and a deduction for car loans.

"A vast majority of the money I am using for these restorations comes from tax revenues the CFO withheld from the Mayor's budget formulation, as well as a small reduction in the fiscal stabilization reserve fund," Mendelson wrote in a prepared statement explaining his recommendations and how they would be funded.

Weeks prior to the budget vote, Lee met with individual councilmembers to discuss what he described as a "fiscal cliff" in FY 2028 and to warn them against relying on the city's reserves. Legislators, following Mendelson's guidance, ignored the CFO.

Those actions cannot bring real solace to childcare workers, union workers or TANF recipients, however. Next fiscal year, the District will likely be in a deeper hole.

"We know we have a structural imbalance in the future," at-large Councilmember Christina Henderson acknowledged on Tuesday as lawmakers considered developing a list of programs to fund if revenue collections improved by the end of the year.

Mendelson reiterated his intention to hold a public hearing or roundtable in the fall to examine the "different tax increases we have discussed" so that lawmakers can explore the pros and cons of various approaches. "It's still a problem. I'm pleased people are recognizing this and talking about that," he said of the recognition of the problems created by relying on one-time rather than recurring funding.

Initially, Ward 1's Brianne Nadeau and other councilmembers had planned to introduce an amendment to create a tax increase for FY 2027, but the votes apparently weren't there on Tuesday for such an action. Acknowledging that fact, Nadeau sought instead to create a contingency spending list, noting specific amounts of money for each area. Because her list wasn't developed in collaboration with all of the other councilmembers, there was resistance.

Ultimately, Mendelson persuaded the council to hold an administrative meeting to discuss a contingency list instead of voting on Nadeau's proposal. After back-and-forth over scheduling conflicts, legislators decided to hold the meeting on June 22, the day before the second vote on the FY 2027 budget.

Nadeau then agreed to withdraw her amendment.

Interestingly, the council reportedly already has a list of ranked priorities, which Mendelson used to decide what funding to restore.

Why a new list?

Your guess is as good as mine. Perhaps they want to give the impression that no special-interest group goes ignored. That's something the council has certainly mastered.

DC's elected officials have also become masters of can-kicking. The city's residents, especially the vulnerable, cannot be used as stage sets, however. The working class is not being provided a viable path to the middle class — even lower middle class — when District officials fall short on public policy expertise or lack the governance and management discipline to engage in meaningful and responsible program evaluation and budgeting.

In my view, leaders shouldn't pat themselves on the back, as councilmembers did earlier this week, for providing temporary solutions to critical needs and demands. A crucial aspect of their mission is helping their community create a vision of its future, design a plan for implementation, and ensure the provision of resources — physical and financial — for its ultimate realization.

In other words, budgeting and financial planning is not some kick-the-can game.

In the early aughts, as the city was coming out of the control board era, the District passed a law requiring performance- or zero-based budgeting. The policy was presumably approved as an attempt to engender confidence in the city government.

However, the law was broken in short order, according to DC Auditor Kathy Patterson, who has been urging the mayor, council and CFO to follow the law since as far back as 2019 — maybe even longer.

"The methodology, Performance-Based Budgeting, is still in the law, but policymakers over the last decade-plus have abandoned its requirements that were put into the D.C. Code in 2001," Patterson, who represented Ward 3 on the DC Council from 1995 to 2007, wrote in a March 2019 blog post on her agency's website. "Instead of designing and implementing a zero-based budget each year, the elected and appointed officials build from current-year spending levels."

The prior month, Patterson had sent a "Management Alert" that "notified the Executive Branch, the Legislative branch, and our third branch of government — the independent [CFO] — that we are not obeying our own budget law."

What happened? Nothing. Some things never change.

When I asked Mendelson and his budget staff whether they had conducted a full evaluation of agency programs and services before deciding how to spend taxpayers' hard-earned money, the answer was no. When I asked whether the council had engaged in zero-based budgeting at any time during his tenure as leader of the legislative branch, which began in 2012, his answer was no. And while lawmakers approved money in FY 2026 to hire two new financial analysts in the council budget office, for the purpose of examining spending and potentially recommending areas where reductions could be implemented, I learned this week that thus far those individuals have been focusing primarily on instructing councilmembers on how to conduct better oversight.

Seriously?!

Truth be told, that might be a good thing — as far as the prospect of improved oversight goes, it's better late than never. An even better thing for everyone — residents, government managers, and elected officials — is for lawmakers to start following the law. That they begin the process, in earnest, of rightsizing the DC government.

If they don't want to take on the task, there are half a dozen local universities and several nonprofit groups, including the highly regarded D.C. Policy Center, that could offer assistance. There's also the city's inspector general as well as Patterson's office.

Pick one, anyone.

It's time to get serious: \$22 billion, of which nearly \$4 billion is spent on a mediocre, duplicative public education system that ignores the potential of DC's only state college, is no paltry sum.

As I read the Committee of the Whole's FY 2027 draft budget report, dated June 9, I found savings that could have been realized. For example, is it prudent for a government facing serious fiscal challenges to provide \$31.8 million for the Access to Justice Foundation when the council restored funding for 58 paralegals and legal assistants in the Office of the Attorney General? Cannot some of those individuals serve the needs of poor and working-class residents who lack legal representation in court?

Should the District provide \$5.6 million to nonprofits for victim service grants? Aren't these already the responsibility of existing city agencies?

Why would a city that cannot fully fund its childcare subsidy program earmark \$2 million to Ford's Theatre Society? Surely there are foundations or corporations from which it can secure such a donation.

Speaking of childcare, why is the council setting aside \$1 million for the Rosemount Center, a nonprofit childcare organization that was in danger of closing last year? Has there been any examination of the progress the group has made in stabilizing operations? With the city having allocated \$153.2 million in childcare subsidies for FY 2027, aren't there other places for the affected children to go if the center were to close?

Should the city provide \$1.4 million to the Washington Literacy Center? Aren't there other nonprofit groups and even the city's libraries engaged in that mission?

And how about the \$93,091 to DC Scores — poetry and soccer — or \$100,000 for Levine School of Music, or \$500,000 for the Woolly Mammoth Theatre? Then there is the \$150,000 grant to the Greater Washington Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, as noted in the council's Budget Support Act; does this mean DC is also funding the Black Chamber of Commerce and the plain ole DC Chamber of Commerce?

I could go on, but you get my point about the wasteful, illogical spending by elected officials at a time when, if the CFO is correct, the city is facing serious financial challenges. Even if some of the expenditures are justifiable, they were approved without adequate scrutiny and explanation on the public record. That fact alone points to a faulty, opaque budgeting process.

Someone reading this is probably saying I should cut the council some slack. Members are doing the best they can.

No one should lower their expectations during tough times. Elected officials should level up. Ward 5's Zachary Parker seemed to get that.

"I'm concerned that we're running into a buzz saw of sorts," he said Tuesday during the budget vote. "I'm clear we are heading toward a fiscal cliff. We need to work on revenues or more seriously work on cutting our spending."

Is that one of those election speeches from the dais that Mendelson seemed to predict? Parker is running for reelection.

I didn't get that feeling. Still, the latter option he mentioned gets my vote.

There's one problem: That kind of work can't be done during a two- or three-hour administrative meeting. Councilmembers, serious about their task of allocating \$22 billion of public money and desirous of losing their reputation as can-kickers, might seek guidance from Patterson. She, after all, works for them.

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