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For Bloomberg, it's all downhill from here

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For the politician lucky enough to be its subject, presidential talk makes a great gig.

The chat comes cost-free, risk-free and bruise-free -- a windfall of flattering attention that the could-be candidate gets to turn on and off.

Once it ends, though, a bill of sorts seems to come due.

Gov. Mario Cuomo had his friends stoking the presidential speculation until the day in 1992 he decided to opt out, leaving the plane to [New Hampshire](#) on the runway. In 1994, a relatively unknown legislator named George Pataki unseated him.

When [Mayor Michael Bloomberg](#) draws a spotlight from here on, it will shine on the hard realities of his day job -- the crude bombing at [Times Square](#), sagging tax revenues, immense housing costs, and the school system's flaws.

For the billionaire Democrat-turned-Republican-turned-Blank mayor, who must leave office next year anyway because of term limits, the tenor of the free publicity can only go downhill from here. The only question is how steep the slide will be.

Take the sexy issue of parking.

Seven years since its formation, the Bloomberg administration has revealed that the city doled out more than 140,000 free parking placards to government officials and others.

That's more than earlier estimates from when the administration moved to start revoking thousands of the perks.

"This tells you that there's a lot of information that still needs to be disclosed," said Corey Bearak, president of the Queens Civic Congress, which opposes the mayor's congestion pricing plan. "They developed the plan based on a set of questionable premises. They should clean their own house before they start mandating the behavior of others."

Worse yet are fire zones. On the city's narrower streets, parking is banned in three or four spaces

off the corner to give firetrucks room to take their wide turns. Otherwise the tow truck comes -- for civilians. The sight of cars with [NYPD](#) passes parked in fire zones, sometimes for hours at a time, is less than rare

Every elected executive has holes in his performance bigger than these. The point here is that as news coverage abhors a vacuum, you can be sure all City Hall follies will eclipse the accounts of mayoral speeches down south.

Mayors hold sweeping powers under the charter. But Bloomberg's garbage-export project has been stalled in [Albany](#). His big development plans are vulnerable to tight borrowing. He has funding issues with Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#). Fiscal pressure on taxes is building.

Any reluctance of top city Democrats to criticize Bloomberg is already waning as the scramble to succeed him intensifies. Some audits by Comptroller William C. Thompson Jr. have hit the administration hard. The City Council under Speaker Christine Quinn called hearings that elicited sharp complaints about how Bloomberg governs the schools. Both Thompson and Quinn are likely mayoral candidates.

But Bloomberg still loves the day job, they say, and the Forbes list of billionaires shows his personal holdings at \$11.5 billion. One unabashed fan, lobbyist and former Council Speaker Peter Vallone Sr., said yesterday, "The mayor will always be a powerful person whether he runs for office or not. He's already committed himself to promoting good government with his billions ... He'll never be a lame duck and with this economic slowdown, which might be a recession, he's probably the right guy at the right time."

Besides, presidential races have proved cruel to the [New York](#) mayors who entered them. John Lindsay gave it a try in 1972, failed, and was gone from Gracie Mansion the following year -- a full generation before [Rudy Giuliani](#)'s shipwreck.

Things could be much worse for Bloomberg -- even as the slide begins.
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