Michael Bloomberg’s mayoralty has been built on one simple fact: the City Charter of New York City gives the mayor enormous power. During his mayoralty, Bloomberg has aggressively used instruments of power to influence almost every aspect of civic life: health, transportation, public schools – (which he has twice persuaded the state legislature to place under his control), parks, culture, and economic development through bold rezoning and preservation policies.

During the past few months, Ken Auletta in The New Yorker, Chris Smith in New York Magazine, and The New York Times’ editorial writers have dissected the Bloomberg record. They have focused on Bloomberg’s personality and wealth as the key factors defining his legacy -- rather than on what he has actually done. For Auletta, a gifted writer who graduated from the “underclass” to the titans of the information industry, it entailed playing out of position, since he has transcended his roots in local politics. For Chris Smith, Bloomberg’s record could simply not compete with the Mayor’s unedited assessment of a television commercial featuring the telegenic Dante di Blasio, especially on the eve of a primary election.

The New York Times’ editorial page has adopted a bipolar approach to Bloomberg’s closing months, harsh criticism that is too late to have an iota of impact on municipal policy. And even when Bloomberg’s school reforms are praised, the mayor gets no credit. The NYPD’s “stop and frisk” policies have become a quasi-religious issue for The Times, overshadowing the fact that in 2012 New York City had the fewest murders and fewest recorded shootings in more than forty-five years. The Times simply refuses to understand how the vast improvement in public safety has encouraged housing in once dangerous areas, attracted a record number of college students to New York City – many of whom then settle here, and lured more than
fifty million tourists a year– creating jobs in restaurants, hotels, and retail, especially for those with limited English skills and formal education.

With Michael Bloomberg’s mayoralty coming to a close, what we can learn from his 12 years in office? Or, should the popular media’s simplistic diagnosis be treated as gospel: that a billionaire mayor tried to impose his own personal agenda on New Yorkers, that he lacked the Clintonian gene to convey empathy on demand, and that his policies ignored the vast majority of middle and low income New Yorkers who cannot afford to live on the upper east side of Manhattan.

As someone who has spent all but 8 of my 64 years in New York City, and who did advise Bloomberg when he ran for the first time in 2001, I think it’s wise to follow Al Smith’s advice: “let’s look at the record.”

New Yorkers adopted a new City Charter in 1989, two years after the United States Supreme Court had ruled the old Board of Estimate ruled it was unconstitutional, in violation of the “one man, one vote” principal. The new city charter, crafted by former City Corporation Counsel F.A.O Schwartz, fundamentally transformed the mayor from a deal-maker to a doer; all power in New York City would flow to and from the Office of the Mayor. The five Borough Presidents have emerged as “cheer leaders,” and the Comptroller remained the city’s fiscal officer while the Public Advocate’s office provided employment for then President of the City Council, Andrew Stein.

Most important, the City Council was expanded to 51 members, each representing a district of approximate 153,000 residents, (with Manhattan districts slightly larger in size than those in the other boroughs leading to a smaller Manhattan delegation than it could rightfully claim). The council does have real authority to review all land use decisions and to approve the municipal budget, but with relatively small districts, drawn to encourage representation, most council members naturally focus on their district, not citywide issues. And the Speaker of the City Council, elected by a majority of politicians, is essentially a ring-master, assigning lucrative committee chairmanships, dispensing rewards to retain the votes of loyal supporters. City council speakers like Peter Vallone, Gifford Miller,
and Christine Quinn fail when they run for mayor because they spend so much time cutting deals that they believe that is what people want in a mayor.

I should note that legislative leaders rarely become executives, and even then, it takes special circumstances. Gerry Ford, the former Speaker of the House of Representatives only became President, because Richard Nixon chose him to be Vice-President after Spiro Agnew was forced out of office. And LBJ, the Majority Leader of the United States Senate, acceded to the Presidency because he was the Vice-President when John F Kennedy was assassinated on the streets of Dallas half a century ago.

The City Charter gives the mayor two unchecked sources of power: control over the budget as well as the authority to appoint every deputy mayor and more than 65 commissioners without any need for review or approval by a legislative body. These appointees serve at the pleasure of the mayor; they can be fired at any time – for any reason. That is what makes New York City government work: the mayor is ultimately accountable for everything – except the subways and buses which are run by the MTA, a state agency under the control of the governor. The mayor determines how much money the city can spend each year; this is more power than either the governor of California or New York has in setting the state budget. And the mayor of Los Angeles does not even select the head of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Bloomberg, having won office without taking funds from business or labor groups, had an unusually free hand to staff his government. He picked people based on their skills and knowledge and drew heavily on government professionals, regardless of their political pedigree. He delegated power and autonomy to his commissioners, the reverse of the Giuliani Administration where city hall mandarins told the commissioners what to do, who to hire, and what they could say to the press. Bloomberg created a climate that encouraged change and fostered municipal innovation; he wanted his commissioners to adopt bold and controversial policies and then backed them up, even in the face of intense criticism.
Soon after taking office in 2002, the Mayor and his new health commissioner, Dr. Tom Frieden, whom he personally recruited, called for a ban on smoking in all workplaces, including restaurants, bars, offices, theaters, and sports arenas. Despite intense opposition by the tobacco industry and the owners and patrons of bars across the city, Bloomberg prevailed. Within a year, cities around the nation followed New York’s lead. As Jim Dwyer has pointed out, today smoking is even banned in Ireland’s bars, something that would have been inconceivable before the Bloomberg ban spread across the globe. The smoking ban, in conjunction with high taxes on cigarettes in New York City, has led to a 51% drop in youth smoking and a one-third drop in adult smoking. And contrary to all predictions, the number of bars and restaurants in New York has increased from 11,746 in 2002 to 17,271 in 2011 and the number of people employed in this industry rose by 48% during the same time period.

Most important, Bloomberg resuscitated the Board of Health, a regulatory body appointed by the mayor, which had originally been created in the 19th century to fight epidemics like cholera and yellow fever. Under Bloomberg, the Board of Health took on 21st century challenges like diabetes, obesity and teen pregnancy. The public health agenda was expanded to prevent epidemics, not just to respond to them. Under Bloomberg, whole milk is banned from public school cafeterias, calorie counts are clearly marked in many fast food establishments, and restaurants are graded for their compliance with city health code.

Bloomberg has even taken on the traditional orthodox Jewish circumcision practice where “mohelim” who engage in “metzitzah b’ped,” a technique that involves direct oral suctioning when the mohel’s mouth and lips are directly on the infant’s circumcision, placing the infant at risk of getting herpes simplex virus Type I, a serious illness in newborns. Parents of infants about to undergo such a procedure are now asked to sign a form acknowledging the risks associated with this practice.
Economic Development: Not just Brick and Mortar

One of Bloomberg’s first acts, upon taking office in 2002, was to kill the Giuliani plan to build a new headquarters for The New York Stock Exchange on Wall Street. Bloomberg and Dan Doctoroff, his Deputy Mayor for Economic Development, came from the world of finance and, that electronic markets would soon make the stock exchange floor obsolete. This was a signal of things to come; few mayors had the confidence to so easily reject the demands of Richard Grasso, then President of the Stock Exchange. Soon, the Bloomberg put a hold on the demolition order for the Highline which the Giuliani Administration had approved. Unlike his predecessors, Bloomberg did not believe that real estate was the basis for economic development. Rather, he recognized that public safety and investments in parks, culture and schools were essential to make the city an attractive place to live and work; that firms in the 21st century would seek out locations with the best brains and talent.

Doctoroff and City Planning Chair Amanda Burden, with the 2012 Olympics as their foil, undertook massive rezonings of old, industrial areas across the city. The Department of City Planning no longer waited for property owners to propose rezoning; the city itself identified areas that should be the sites for new housing, offices, parks, and retail stores. The era in which the Department of City Planning waited for land use lawyers to seek rezoning was over; the city would plan for the future, negotiate with community groups, and create the conditions for private investment --- even if it meant being decades ahead of the market.

Unlike Rockefeller and Lindsay who built Starrett City and Coop City, huge apartment complexes at the outer edges of the Bronx and Brooklyn, the Bloomberg Administration focused on underused areas close to Manhattan -- on the East River -- and on Manhattan’s far west side which was disconnected from midtown Manhattan and filled with rail yards, auto repair shops and aging industrial buildings.
Long neglected areas like Coney Island were rezoned for housing and commercial uses. And on the lower eastside, where community conflict stalled any development for forty years, the Bloomberg Administration tirelessly forged a plan that will ultimately generate more than one million square feet of housing, open space, and shops, next to the 238 foot wide Delancey Street, Manhattan’s widest street.

Critics of the Bloomberg Administration claim that only the rich benefit from his development policies. Nothing could be further from the truth. The 4th Avenue corridor in southern Park Slope is filled with apartment buildings that have replaced gas stations and garages; First Avenue in east Harlem is witnessing a surge of new middle income housing, and Hunter’s Point on the Queens waterfront, will soon have the largest concentration of worker housing, designed for the people who teach in the schools, staff the hospitals, and run the subways. More than 160,000 units of affordable housing were built or preserved by the Bloomberg Administration, far more than any of his predecessors – including LaGuardia, and he had the federal government to pay for vast public housing projects like Red Hook, Harlem River Houses, and Queensbridge Housing.

Perhaps the greatest single example of how Bloomberg redefined economic development has been his strategy to strengthen the city’s scientific and engineering infrastructure. Bloomberg, a former Chairman of John Hopkins and Robert Steel, the current Deputy Mayor for Economic Development and the former Chairman of Duke University, recognized that the city’s universities were lagging in science and engineering.

Admittedly, New York City had superb medical, law and business schools, and outstanding programs in film, music, and the performing arts, but we simply did not produce the ideas, inventions and talent that drove the high tech industries of the future. Only a mayor like Michael Bloomberg could tell NYU and Columbia leaders that their intellectual hegemony was over.

Bloomberg intended to bring in a new player – to raise the city’s engineering capability, offering free land and infrastructure to a
university willing to establish a serious scientific presence in NYC. After a global competition, Cornell-Technion was chosen to build a new campus on Roosevelt Island, while NYU and Columbia, were given city assistance to launch their own new programs in science and technology. It is too soon to know how the Bloomberg Administration strategy affects the city’s science and technological infrastructure, but New York City is now perceived as more than a place to pursue a career in art history, early childhood education, or securities law.

Bloomberg in Albany

No NYC Mayor can function without learning how to play in Albany. The conventional wisdom is that Bloomberg has been unable to work Albany to achieve his goals. This is inaccurate; in fact, just the opposite is true. Bloomberg admittedly failed to win state support for two high profile initiatives: congestion pricing and a west side stadium, but no mayor has had a more ambitious Albany agenda.

Bloomberg did something that Koch, Dinkins and Giuliani failed to achieve: mayoral control of the city’s public schools. The Republican Mayor John Lindsay was so distrusted by the state legislature that the NYC Mayor was given just two appointees, out of seven, on the old Board of Education. Bloomberg won mayoral control twice, and even managed to win legislative approval for expanding the number of charter schools in NYC, despite intense union opposition.

But his real victories have rarely been noticed. He won state approval for his plan to create a new class of taxis for street-hails in the outer boroughs, something the taxi industry fought with every dollar they could muster. Three thousand licenses have already been issued for the new lime green taxis and by the end of the 2013, a total of 6000 licenses will be been issued, with an additional 6,000 to be granted in the next two years. This is a revolution in outer borough transportation, creates a new class of entrepreneurs and access to transportation in neighborhoods outside Manhattan.
Bloomberg also found a way to get the state government to directly help the municipal budget, by having the state take over payments for the bonds issued by the Municipal Assistance Corporation during the 1970’s fiscal crisis, a stroke of financial creativity that Governor George Pataki unsuccessfully fought in court. Bloomberg’s success in convincing the state legislature to pay for a $6 billion capital construction program for the New York City schools, is rarely mentioned but it has resulted in more than 100,000 new seats in the city’s public schools and hundreds of new and renovated school buildings.

Perhaps nothing illustrates how Bloomberg has outplayed Albany than the city’s takeover of Governor’s Island and Brooklyn Bridge Park. Both properties, jointly owned by the city and state, were stalled; the state was reluctant to spend money on these high profile, but unimproved properties. Bloomberg offered the state legislative leaders and Governor David Patterson a deal they could not refuse. He would invest municipal funds but only if NYC had full control over both properties, Governor’s Island and Brooklyn Bridge Park. He has kept his word; today Brooklyn Bridge Park is a magnet for visitors from across the borough and Governor’s Island is on the way to being a world-class park.

When compared with the way in which the state legislature simply abolished the commuter tax during the Giuliani Administration, a misguided assault on NYC by the state legislature, Mike Bloomberg’s record in Albany has been amazing – admittedly because he benefitted from largely cooperative Governors for the first 9 years of his mayoralty. By contrast, the Bloomberg-Cuomo battles over school aid, taxis, and homeless housing have been intense and not always beneficial to the city.

As we approach the end of the Bloomberg mayoralty, it is stunning to realize the scope of his impact on the city --- from what we eat, to where we live, to what we study, to how we move – by bikes, ferries, taxis, and soon subways. The guy has made a difference – it’s an amazing record – one that the next mayor will have a hard time matching.