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Street to critics: Hold the phone!

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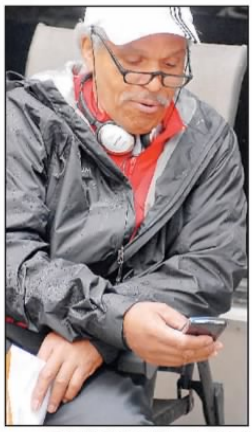

TOM GRALISH / Inquirer Staff

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Mayor Street waited for hours, joking and messaging, to buy an iPhone. (From left: Hendrik Soewatdy, No. 4 in line; Street; Christian Hain, No. 2; Leonard F. Johnson, No. 1.) Top, with the gizmo after it went on sale at 6 p.m.

Quest for iPhone strikes a chord

By Patrick Kerkstra
and Katie Stuhldreher
INQUIRER STAFF WRITERS

There's no disputing that it looked bad: the mayor of the nation's sixth-largest city, clad in a rain slicker and sweats, waiting in line, hour after hour, just a few feet from an alleyway trash bin.

All for the chance to buy a cell phone.

Mayor Street, a self-described gadget lover, was so keen to get his hands on Apple's much-hyped new iPhone that he parked himself outside a Center City store at 3:30 a.m. yesterday. Only two other enthusiasts got there ahead of him — for an item that wasn't to go on sale until 6 p.m.

It didn't take long before passersby and nearly every media outlet in the city began to ask: Shouldn't the mayor have something more important to do?

"With all due respect, what the hell are you doing?" a WYSP radio host asked the mayor in an on-air interview. "Seriously. You're the mayor of Philadelphia. You're standing in line for a toy, basically."

And that from a guy who calls himself Vinnie the Crumb.

Street seemed stunned by both the extent of the media interest and the nega-

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Mayor Street is escorted to his car after purchasing the iPhone at a Center City store for $640.

Street's day in iPhone queue

IPHONE from A1

tive reactions. He said he had been working throughout the day from the alley, using his Blackberry to write e-mails to his chief of staff and to call City Council members.

"For those people who say, 'Why isn't the mayor at work?', they fundamentally don't know how work is done in the 21st century, with all these communication devices," Street said as he waited outside the shop at 16th and Ranstead Streets.

"This is not a whole lot different then if I were doing some neighborhood activity and not in City Hall. I'm in touch then and I'm in touch now."

Street's fellow technophiles agreed. Most of those waiting in line with him praised his interest in technology.

But they were in the minority. Most Philadelphians interviewed yesterday seemed to think that the mayor's cellphone vigil trivialized the problems confronting the city, such as the surge in murders, now at 200 for the year.

Several criticized Street in person. One was Barbara Jendrzejewska, a 61-year-old retired Law Department clerk from Port Richmond, who weighed in as she walked past him.

"When I was working for the city," she sniffed, "I would have been fired if I left the building to go to the Dollar Store."

Though it may not have appeared so yesterday, Street is regarded as one of the hardest-working officials in the city's recent history. Throughout his career, he's been among the first to arrive at City Hall in the morning and among the last to leave.

"I get criticized for being on duty too much," Street said. "People tell me, you should turn it off."

The mayor did not spend his entire day in line. He left on at least two occasions; once to address youths who had completed a violence reduction program, and a second time to meet with a group of ministers.

Each time, he was replaced in line by city-paid members of his security team. That team includes sworn police officers, where veterans make a base salary of $51,000 a year.

"We can go around and around on this and turn it into Watergate, but I think it's a little silly, I really do," Street spokesman Joe Grace said when asked repeatedly about the propriety of using city employees to wait in line.

Street said those who replaced him in line would have been on the clock anyway.

"The city isn't experiencing additional cost because somehow I decided to come over here today," Street said.

The mayor, who leaves office in January, ran into his would-be successors when he got out of line around 12:30 p.m. and headed back to City Hall.

After Street left, Democrat Michael Nutter and Republican Al Taubenberger — who were preparing for a joint news conference on tax policy — joined in expressing their disapproval of the mayor's behavior.

"Unfortunately, somewhere today, some person may get killed or five people will probably get shot," Nutter said. "So I think there are a few things that are critically important to being mayor of the city of Philadelphia vs. getting a phone."

Said Taubenberger: "I think Philadelphians would rather see him doing something than standing in line."

Street agreed that he could have sent someone to stand in line for him, or perhaps called Apple or AT&T and used his position to avoid waiting in line.

"If I pulled strings for the phone, I knew people would criticize that, so I did what I think is right," the mayor said.

Finally, at 6 p.m., the iPhone went on sale. Surrounded by a throng of television cameras and reporters capturing his every move, Street ordered the eight-gigabyte model, paid the $640.93 bill using his own credit card, and walked out of the store to the applause of his fellow geeks.

He would be spending at least part of the night, he said, "checking it out."

Was it worth the wait?

"Absolutely. I met some very nice people today."

And then he was gone, headed back to City Hall, with a couple of aides trailing him.

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