

The Make-Up Of The Lower Manhattan Redevelopment Corporation

by {ga=tangotti}

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It does not look as if the diverse downtown communities will have much to say about plans to redevelop Lower Manhattan. The new 11-member commission named by Governor George Pataki and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to plan for the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan is top-heavy with business executives and City Hall insiders. Local community leaders, people who live and work in the area, and the victims of the economic fallout from September 11 are not included.

The governor named seven of the panel members and effectively retains control of the new body, named the Lower Manhattan Redevelopment Corporation. The authority is a subsidiary of the Empire State Development Corporation, headed by Pataki appointee Charles Gargano. It has the power to condemn land and override city land use regulations. In other words, it can thumb its nose at the city's new mayor and city council.

Four of the appointees to the new body are from the banking and financial services sectors. Two are from the ranks of Giuliani staffers who are wondering whether they will have a job after January 1. And another is a former Giuliani commissioner who is now a corporate executive.

The only representative from labor, Ed Malloy of the Building and Construction Trades Council, can be counted on to advocate any redevelopment that means more jobs for the limited and exclusive membership of the building trades. But no one represents the 80,000 workers who lost their jobs after September 11 or the 80,000 whose work has been cut back. Most of them are or were in the service unions, and many were not unionized at all. Many are immigrants whose access to relief and services has been limited.

Only one of the nominees, Madelyn Wils, Chair of Community Board 1, represents the directly affected neighborhoods. Portions of Community Board 2 were also heavily impacted but they are not represented. Absent are representatives from Lower Manhattan's diverse residential community, which includes Tribeca, Battery Park City and Chinatown. Absent are representatives of the families of the victims, who have a stake in shaping any memorial planned for the site and its surroundings.

WHY THE BIG RUSH?

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Pataki's move might give one the impression that the governor is moving swiftly to support redevelopment of lower Manhattan after the September 11 disaster. However, John Whitehead, chairman of the new development corporation, made the point that "How quickly its done is not the primary concern. We want it to be done right." This makes the naming of the directors look more like a timely move to preempt any initiatives taken by Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg, who during his campaign stated that an independent authority was not needed. Most estimates are it will take five to ten years to redevelop the area. If there is no big rush, then why move so quickly to name an authority?

In the early days after September 11, downtown property owners, particularly Larry Silverstein, who owns the lease on the World Trade Center site, talked loudly about the need to reconstruct the financial district and the twin towers as speedily as possible as a defiant symbol of resistance against terrorism. There was talk of the need to override local land use and environmental rules. It soon became clear that it would take at least a year to clean up the site and many more to rebuild. In his election campaign Fernando Ferrer suggested that this was an opportunity to strengthen business districts outside of Lower Manhattan, a strategy that would help keep businesses from moving out of the city. Mayor-elect Bloomberg appears to share that view.

Cries were also heard from the residents and businesses in Lower Manhattan. They noted that Wall Street was just one of several parts of an evolving mixed-use community including over 100,000 residents, thousands of retailers, schools, parks and a network of community services. Over the last decade, thousands of vacant office units were converted to residential use, a response to the enormous commercial vacancy rate. In Tribeca, industrial buildings were converted to residential units. Before rushing to create new office space, it would be best to consider the millions of square feet of vacant office space that followed construction of the World Trade Center in the 1970s. Would it make sense to once again build for a market that never was there in the first place?

WHO WILL PLAN?

Will the Lower Manhattan Redevelopment Corporation be able to create a plan that makes sense to all those concerned about the future of the downtown? From the solitude of their office towers, can the appointed commissioners hear the diverse voices and build consensus? Or will they plunge ahead and use the exceptional powers granted by the governor to implement their own plans?

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Is it too much to hope that the governor will name more directors and bring in leaders with roots in the affected communities to coordinate the planning efforts? Because everyone now recognizes the need to rebuild Lower Manhattan in the context of a comprehensive plan, the Authority could sponsor a broad public process that brings in all sectors of the community to develop a vision and strategy for the area. This should be coordinated by Community Boards 1 and 2, and the mechanism should be Section 197-a of the City Charter, which allows community boards to submit plans to the City Planning Commission and City Council for official approval. The redevelopment authority should pledge in advance to finance implementation of the projects that win consensus in the 197-a plan. This could have the effect of building consensus among the community's diverse sectors, and could minimize the inevitable expense and delays of conflict and litigation.

A 197-a plan for Lower Manhattan would help stimulate community planning throughout the city by setting a precedent of producing plans that get implemented. Up to now, communities have been reluctant to do 197-a plans because the city has made no commitment to help them or implement their recommendations. The plan for downtown Manhattan could be the first in a series of much-needed plans that engage diverse communities in plotting their futures.