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"Construction
commander sets the
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Construction commander sets the pace downtown

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Charles Maikish believes in the resilience of lower Manhattan. Speaking at a meeting of Professional Women in Construction recently, Maikish, the former director of the World Trade Center department with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, recalled how little time it took to get the complex back to normal after the 1993 attack.

"It took us three weeks after the bombing to move the Governor's office back in," he noted. "It took us six weeks to clean up [everything else]. So it's doable."

Considering the mission ahead of him now, optimism is a necessity. In February of this year, when it became apparent that downtown was about to be swamped with dozens of major construction projects at once, the Governor and the Mayor appointed Maikish executive director of the Lower Manhattan Construction Command Center, an agency which will ultimately bear the responsibility for anything and everything having to do with downtown construction.

"Our role is to facilitate, mitigate and communicate around all issues tied with construction," Maikish explains, as he tries to come up with a concise definition of his new job. "There are numerous constituencies that I interact with. There are private developers who have significant projects in lower Manhattan. There are construction managers and contractors. There is the Department of Transportation, the New York Police Department, the Fire Department, and Department of Environmental Protection. There is the state aspect to it, with the Port Authority, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the Battery Park Authority. And then there are the remaining constituency groups, which are made up of residents [and local businesses.]"

While Maikish is pretty happy with the pace of the downtown rebuilding process--"good planning and good design are requisite for good construction. You don't want to put a shovel in the ground unless you are sure of what you are building," he likes to note,--he does anticipate that his job will be challenging, especially in the next few years as some of the biggest downtown projects commence.

While the Fulton Street Transit Center, the South Ferry Terminal and 7 World Trade Center are being constructed with relatively little pain, this summer, work will begin on the World Trade Center transportation center, on Dey Street Corridor, on Route 9A of the West Side Highway, on a new facility for Manhattan College, on several residential buildings in Battery Park. Next spring, Larry Silverstein plans to go ahead with the Freedom Tower.

Through it all, Maikish will have to make sure that work permits are issued to the right people--the Construction Command Center is also charged with preventing fraud--and at the right time; that enough construction materials are delivered to the area without causing traffic chaos and that lower Manhattan residents are not forced to live amid dust and noise 24/7.

"Looking at the effort here, you start to think that maybe we should have started [our work] six months

[earlier]," he jokes. "There is always a certain amount of disturbance and inconvenience that goes with progress. There are requirements that we have to meet, there are environmental performance criteria--noise abatement, dust control. Part of our function is to maintain mobility in the area, maintain [normal levels] of traffic, make sure that noisy part of construction is limited to certain parts of the day. The whole idea is to allow for quality of life in lower Manhattan."

To resolve some of these issues Maikish and his people have been meeting with community groups in order to come up with compromises that work for everyone. It's obvious that noise will have to be made if the projects are to be completed, but one solution would be to let construction crews work more often and finish their job earlier. And some areas will be eligible for greater consideration than others--"If you have a school, you don't want the noise going off while the kids are in," Maikish explains. "That's what mitigation is all about. There has to be a give and take."

On the development and construction side, people are worried about obtaining labor and equipment, as well as being able to do their jobs in a timely fashion. In order to resolve these concerns, the Construction Command Center holds regular construction coordination meetings.

"We discuss what the projects are, what area they are located in, [what needs to be done] and then there are follow-up meetings," Maikish says. "One thing we are doing is working with the trades and the unions [to ensure that there are enough people for the jobs]. On the materials side, it's about looking at the plan, the time for receiving materials, making sure that [equipment] use is coordinated, so we don't have to close the street. It's that kind of coordination that becomes essential on a day-to-day basis."

Maikish admits that he has encountered some resistance, but says that eventually people realize that with the kind of effort now underway in lower Manhattan cooperation with others is necessary.

"Each contractor, each project manager is interested in delivering his project on time and on budget. How it interfaces with another is generally not their concern," he explains. "I think, though, that there's recognition of the value that can be brought by that kind of effort. We are not here strictly to regulate, it's more to facilitate. Will there be times when construction is impeded because of community concerns? Absolutely. But [we will make sure] the projects run smoothly."

And though many downtown developers have not yet had a chance to work with Maikish and the Center extensively, most are willing to give the agency the benefit of the doubt.

"I think that what Charles' agency is doing is a tremendous help, not only to the people who live and work downtown, but also to the developers," says Moinian Group president Joseph Moinian, whose firm is currently completing construction on a downtown condominium building and will soon begin work on a mixed-use project at 123 Washington St.

"We are the most sophisticated city for construction in the world and the only reason we are who we are is because we are the best at staging and doing things that overlap with, but don't kill other projects. I think this office will play a role in making sure that staging is coordinated, that there is no garbage, no dust and so on."

Moinian is particularly excited about the Construction Command Center's relationship with the Department of Buildings. He hopes that Maikish will be able to cut down the time developers currently

spend waiting for permits.

"There is a lot of activity downtown, so maybe this is a way for them to create something express--that would be greatly beneficial," he notes.

"I certainly think that Charles has the right credentials and experience [for the job] and he is a downtown lover like myself, so when you have that in your blood, you should have no problems."

Another downtown developer, Francis Greenburger, chairman of Time Equities, who has plans for a residential building at 47 West St., says he believes that the Construction Command Center could be a very good thing--as long as it avoids becoming another bureaucratic hurdle for the industry.

"I have not yet worked with them, so I don't have direct experience, but I know that there are numerous logistic issues in terms of construction downtown," he says. "I also know that the residential population has a number of concerns about the process, about the noise and congestion. So to the extent that somebody tries to coordinate those issues, I think it's constructive. It depends on how well it's handled."

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