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"As Construction
Boom Looms, City
Starts Downtown Air
Tests"

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As Construction Boom Looms, City Starts Downtown Air Tests

by Barry Owens

The Lower Manhattan Construction Command Center, the city agency that will coordinate truck traffic, enforce environmental regulations and otherwise aim to ease the impacts of constant construction in the neighborhood over the next decade, began its task last month by launching a program to monitor air quality Downtown.

The program began in late June with the installation of air sampling devices at several locations below Canal Street, near the sites of major construction projects, and will include the daily collection of air samples. Charles Maikish, the command center's director, presented a broad outline of the program to a committee of Community Board 1 last month.

"The goal is to make sure that the air in Lower Manhattan is as good as it is anywhere else in Manhattan," he said.

The sampling devices are meant to supplement the air quality monitors that will be set up on-site during the deconstruction of 130 Liberty Street and Fiterman Hall and at other construction projects. The machines are in northern and southern Battery Park City, in southern Tribeca, on Park Row near City Hall Park and in the Financial District.

The devices test for particles in the air, and analysis of the samples will in most cases be able to determine where the particles come from.

"We will be able to tell whether it is related to construction, or weather patterns, or even ship movement in the harbor," Maikish said. "If there is a spike in the readings, we have to determine why. If we determine that a contractor is not complying with environmental criteria, they will be shut down, period."

Those criteria include the use of ultra-low-sulfur diesel fuel in off-road construction vehicles, limitations on idling times for diesel-powered engines, and dust-control measures at construction sites.

The results of the daily samples will be published weekly, sent to various government agencies and posted at www.lowermanhattan.info.

Maikish said he expects construction Downtown to be heaviest in 2007 and 2008, but he is eager to have the air sampling devices up now so a baseline can be established.

The command center will oversee the program in consultation with the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, and the city's Department of Environmental Protection.