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Bloomberg Balks at 9/11 Trial, in Blow to the White House

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The Obama administration on Wednesday lost its most prominent backer of the plan to try the self-described mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks in Lower Manhattan when Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg said the trial should not be held in New York City.

The mayor's reversal was a political blow to the White House's efforts to resolve a landmark terror case a few blocks from where Al Qaeda hijackers rammed planes into the World Trade Center, a trial that the president saw as an important demonstration of American justice.

Mr. Bloomberg said that a more secure location, like a military base, would be less disruptive and less costly. His remarks echoed growing opposition from Wall Street executives, the real estate industry and neighborhood groups, who have questioned the burdens that such a trial would bring to a heavily trafficked area of the city.

"It's going to cost an awful lot of money and disturb an awful lot of people," Mr. Bloomberg said at

a news conference in Brooklyn. "My hope is that the attorney general and the president decide to change their mind."

Administration officials expressed chagrin at the mayor's statements, which appeared to come as a surprise. But there was no immediate talk of revising the decision to hold criminal trials for Khalid Shaikh Mohammed and his co-defendants in New York.

"Our federal courts have a long history of safely and securely handling international terrorism cases, and no district has a longer history than the Southern District of New York in Manhattan," said Dean Boyd, a Justice Department spokesman.

Mr. Bloomberg's comments came in response to a question about a unanimous vote by a Lower Manhattan community board urging that the trial be held elsewhere. He did not explicitly demand that the trial be moved.

Still, his forceful objections came at a difficult time for the administration, which announced in

November that it would prosecute Mr. Mohammed and other Qaeda operatives in federal criminal court rather than before a military tribunal.

Congressional Republicans are threatening a financial maneuver to block the trials from being held in New York and are certain to seize on the mayor's remarks. On Tuesday, six senators wrote to Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. and urged him to abandon the idea.

The letter, signed by Senators Joseph I. Lieberman, independent of Connecticut; John McCain, Republican of Arizona; Blanche L. Lincoln, Democrat of Arkansas; Susan M. Collins, Republican of Maine; Jim Webb, Democrat of Virginia; and Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, read, in part, "You will be providing them one of the most visible platforms in the world to exalt their past acts and to rally others in support of fur-

ther terrorism.”

David B. Rivkin, a former Justice Department and White House lawyer in Republican administrations who favors military commissions, said that while the mayor’s view had no legal force, it had enormous political significance.

“The administration is at a precarious point on this issue,” Mr. Rivkin said. If a quick solution is not found to the dispute over a trial site, he said, “this whole thing could come crashing down,” forcing the administration to reverse course and place Mr. Mohammed before a military commission at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Mr. Bloomberg had steadfastly supported the location of the trial. When the news broke two months ago, he declared, “It is fitting that 9/11 suspects face justice near the World Trade Center site, where so many New Yorkers were murdered.”

But over the past few weeks, he has heard from scores of business and community leaders who urged him to reverse course. Real estate brokers argued that secu-

rity restrictions would dampen the market for apartments in Chinatown and TriBeCa; small-business owners feared a severe drop-off in customers; and residents worried that they would be unable to use their local streets.

The Police Department has said that in preparation for the trial, the area around the courthouse would be flooded with uniformed police officers, in cars and on horseback, and surrounded by 2,000 interlocking metal barriers.

“I believe it would destroy the economy in Lower Manhattan,” said Steve Spinola, president of the Real Estate Board of New York, which represents property owners. He has urged the mayor’s office to speak out against holding the trial in the city.

The city estimated it would spend more than \$200 million a year on security for the trial, making it one of the most expensive security operations it would ever take on.

City Hall aides said that the complex trial could drag on for years, eventually costing the city close to \$1 billion in the middle of a deep recession, though most of

that is expected to be shouldered by the federal government.

Raymond W. Kelly, the city’s police commissioner, while publicly supporting the mayor’s earlier position, has also expressed alarm over the impact of the trial on the Police Department, which has shrunk significantly since Mr. Bloomberg took office in 2002. Providing security for the court case, he has told city officials, would “suck the oxygen” from the department and leave it little flexibility to pursue new initiatives, according to people told of the conversations.

On Wednesday, Mr. Bloomberg said the city could ultimately handle hosting the trial, but said it would be better if it were held outside the city.

“Can we provide security? Yes. Could you provide security elsewhere? Yeah,” he said. “The suggestion of a military base is probably a reasonably good one.”

Mr. Bloomberg added, with a hint of sarcasm, “It would be great if the federal government could find a site that didn’t cost a billion dollars, which using downtown will.”