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City Room



By Al Baker

For the first time, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg has spoken out against plans to stage the trial of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, accused mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks, at the federal courthouse in Lower Manhattan, joining a growing chorus of people who believe the epic trial will be too disruptive and expensive for the city.

“It would be great if the federal government could find a site that didn’t cost a billion dollars, which using downtown will,” he told reporters on Wednesday.

“It’s going to cost an awful lot of money and disturb an awful lot of people,” he said. “Can we provide security? Yes. Could you provide security elsewhere? Yeah, and I mean — the suggestion of a military base is probably a reasonably good one. Relatively easy to supply — to provide security. They tend to be outside of cities so that they don’t disrupt other people.”

It was a marked change from Mr. Bloomberg’s initial reaction to the news, just two months ago, that the trial would be held in Manhattan. “It is fitting that 9/11 suspects face justice near the World Trade Center site where so many New Yorkers were murdered,” he said at the time.

The mayor is not the only one pondering a military base as the place for a trial. Leaders of Community Board 1 in Lower Manhattan also want the government to study the feasibility of holding the trial elsewhere within the Southern District of New York.

On Tuesday evening, the group’s full board voted 42-to-0 to ask Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. to consider a list of alternative sites. They include the United States Military Academy at West Point, the National Guard base at Stewart International Airport near Newburgh and a federal prison in Otisville.

The Southern District of the federal court system covers Manhattan, the Bronx, Westchester and five other downstate counties.

Julie Menin, chairwoman of Community Board 1, said she wanted the federal government to seriously study the costs, security implications and the overall impact to the communities in each of those areas, to “start a dialogue” about moving the trial out of Lower Manhattan.

“We are looking at military installations because they provide a political compromise between those who favor a less public setting, i.e., a military tribunal and those who favor a federal court trial, so what we are recommending is that a federal judge would preside in one of these military settings,” Ms. Menin said on Wednesday. “I’m trying to think outside-the-box solutions that are still jurisdictionally within the Southern District and may provide additional security if they are on a military installation.”

Community Board 1 represents the seaport and financial districts of Lower Manhattan and TriBeCa, Battery Park City and parts of Chinatown, as well as ground zero.

Of plans to hold the trial at the federal courthouse in Foley Square, Ms Menin said that the site “is next to the financial district, which is the financial capital of our country.”

She added, “Why on earth would we have the trial in the heart of the financial district when it has already been attacked twice by terrorists and when our country is on the verge of trying to recover from the economic recession?”

Ms. Menin said the board’s resolution would be sent to elected officials, including Senator Charles S. Schumer and others.

Adding to the chorus of opposition, the city’s oldest real estate trade association said on Wednesday that the trial would “wreak havoc” on Lower Manhattan and the commercial and residential property owners there. After working behind the scenes for more than two months to urge state and federal officials to consider other locations for the trial, the group, the Real Estate Board of New York, has started a Web site, MoveTheTrial.com, to urge the public to become involved.

Last week, in a joint statement, a list of politicians, including Representative Jerrold L. Nadler, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, State Senator Daniel L. Squadron and Councilwoman Margaret Chin, urged an alternate site, one less harmful to “our already overburdened Lower Manhattan neighborhoods.”