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Where to hold 9/11 trial? Not in NYC, some say

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NEW YORK -- Where should the men accused of planning the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks be tried? Not here, say New York City business and community leaders whose list of alternatives includes military bases, federal prisons and a 172-acre island in New York Harbor.

Even Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who previously supported the Obama administration's decision to hold the trial in New York, appeared to change his mind. "If they were to move it elsewhere, I'd be very happy with that," Bloomberg said Wednesday.

When U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder announced last month that professed Sept. 11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and four accused accomplices would be tried in federal court in lower Manhattan, the initial outcry was over trying them in a civilian court. Critics warned that the trial would give the men a world stage to spout anti-U.S. rhetoric.

Downtown Manhattan civic leaders and the Real Estate Board of New York say they have no problem with a civilian trial, but it should be somewhere else.

"We cannot do that again to lower Manhattan," said real estate board President Steven Spinola, whose group has set up a Web site, <http://www.MoveTheTrial.com>.

Julie Menin, chairwoman of Community Board 1 in lower Manhattan, said the Justice Department should consider "outside-the-box" ideas for a trial venue - places such as Governors Island, a former military base in New York Harbor that now welcomes summertime picnickers and bike riders; the U.S. Military Academy at West Point or Stewart Air National Guard Base in Newburgh, N.Y.

Community Board 1, a quasi-governmental body whose jurisdiction encompasses the federal courthouse and the nearby World Trade Center site, sent a letter to Holder on Wednesday requesting a study for "appropriate alternatives" within New York's southern judicial district.

No date has been set for the trial, which could take years. Stepped-up security will make it an expensive proposition.

Bloomberg has estimated the cost at \$216 million for the first year after the suspects arrive in Manhattan from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. After that, the mayor said it would cost \$200 million annually for as long as the men are detained in the city - mainly overtime for extra New York Police Department patrols.

Bloomberg and other New York elected officials have called on the federal government to foot the bill.

Spinola of the real estate board said the steep price tag for security is only part of the problem.

"What's the economic impact on the city of New York?" he asked. "The restaurants in Chinatown, the small stores in lower Manhattan? This is just the wrong place to put the trial."

Dean Boyd, a Justice Department spokesman, said, "We are aware of the impacts that added security can have on neighboring communities, and we will work closely with local officials to minimize disruptions to the community to the greatest extent possible, consistent with security needs."

Spinola said the trial might be an economic boon somewhere else, with reporters filling hotels and restaurants.

Officials in two areas that have been floated as trial venues were doubtful.

Spinola mentioned the state prison in Ossining, also known as Sing Sing.

"It is just not an appropriate place for it," said Village of Ossining Mayor William Hanauer.

Community Board 1's list of possible trial locales includes a federal jail in Otisville, N.Y., about 65 miles northwest of New York City.

"There would be a tremendous impact on the community," said Otisville Deputy Mayor Diane Loeven. "There are no lodging accommodations within 10 miles. ... I can't even imagine it happening here."

Menin's first idea was Governors Island, a former U.S. Army and Coast Guard base just a half-mile ferry ride from lower Manhattan. In an op-ed piece in The New York Times, she noted that Confederate soldiers were imprisoned there during the Civil War.

But Governors Island has not been an Army base since 1966. The Coast Guard left in 1996, and the island has been transformed into a park that hosts art studios, Little League games and guided hikes.

"It's a new great public space for the people of New York City," said David Koren, executive director of Figment, which holds an annual arts festival on the island. "To put it back into a state where people can't get to it is really a crime."

Not to mention the fact that there is no courthouse on Governors Island. Legal experts said they know of no precedent for holding a federal trial anywhere besides a federal courtroom.

"It's far-fetched," said Daniel Richman, a former federal prosecutor and a professor at Columbia Law School. "To move the trial to some ... inaccessible location would threaten to diminish much of the legitimacy and adherence to process that the government is seeking to obtain in this case."

(This version CORRECTS that Sing Sing is a state prison.)