

Friday, 1/30/09 | Chris Ward, Executive Director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey

SHUSTER: Welcome back to 1600 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE. We've been talking all week at this time in our show about the fierce debate over Ground Zero in New York, and how our nation should reclaim the can-do spirit of those who worked and died there.

Joining us is Christopher Ward, executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the government agency responsible for the rebuilding at Ground Zero.

Mr. Ward, thank you for joining us. Before I throw some questions at you, I want to start by giving you some credit that you deserve. The underground—this is to help our viewers. The underground transportation hub and the ground level 9/11 memorial are coming along. You've made progress on those issues, where others have failed. So congratulations.

The key issue, at least for us, is the dispute over which set of office towers should be built along side the ground level memorial. Again, to help our viewers, here is the latest video of the Freedom Tower office building plan. We can see concrete and construction going about 30 feet above ground level. This is the artist sketch of what the Freedom Tower is supposed to look like when completed.

And here is a Twin Tower design embraced by many 9/11 families. Again, both plans incorporate the transportation hub and the ground-level memorial. So let's focus on the office tower dispute. Christopher, as you know, a strong majority of the 9/11 families want the Twin Towers, not the Freedom Towers. Same with New York police and firefighter organizations. In our own online poll this week, involving nearly 900 respondents, 93 percent want the Twin Tower plan; seven percent the Freedom Tower plan.

My first question is, does the public view matter?

CHRISTOPHER WARD, PORT AUTHORITY OF NY AND NJ: Well, I don't know where you got that polling from. This project has been going on in New York City obviously quite some time. There was a broad public consensus that brought together the plan we are, in fact, building today. And as your introduction made clear, the One World Trade Center is going up. We are building the memorial. We are building the transit hub.

But all of these are part of one large project, integrated into a single downtown community. So for people to now talk about an opportunity to bring back another plan, we are beyond that debate and we are now—what we are not debating is the need to build downtown.

SHUSTER: I get your point, except that the Twin Tower plan was never allowed to be introduced as part of the whole process years ago. Again, the Twin Tower plan would incorporate the transportation hub and the memorial. Again, here's another issue. The Freedom Tower apparently hasn't received any corporate tenant commitments. A big potential one pulled out recently. I know that there are negotiations involving a government agency that may rent some space.

If the market has decided against the Freedom Tower design and rent, why should any local, state, or federal government agency, on behalf of taxpayers, buy into the Freedom Tower?

WARD: First of all, I don't know about any tenant that has pulled out. In fact, we do have private sector tenants who have signed a letter of commitment. We also have a commitment from the federal government as well as the state government to take just a portion of that building. This will be a class-A office space in downtown, the largest structure in New York City, a green building.

We believe this is going to meet the market at the right time and allow other private tenants augment what we already have as critical base tenants for the financing of that overall iconic structure.

We're confident with the construction we have to date, the speed with which it's being built, that both the governmental, the private tenants, which I mentioned before. Then when the real estate market comes back, as we know it will, that tower will get filled.

SHUSTER: We look forward to hearing who the private tenants are, because that doesn't seem to be public knowledge. We haven't found any. That's another issue. Here's the larger issue that I think so many 9/11 families have. This was expressed by Twin Tower engineer Ken Gardner, who was on our show earlier this week. Watch.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

KEN GARDNER, ARCHITECT: This symbol is to be recognized in countries around the world, in every culture and every language. This is an opportunity to show the world that the boldness of America, the boldness and strength of this economy is back.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SHUSTER: Again, he's talking there about the Twin Towers. Do you really believe, Christopher, that, in your heart of hearts, that the Freedom Tower plan is the proper way to remember—the proper way, the proper response to terrorists who hated America's can-do spirit, as represented by the Twin Towers?

WARD: I think most important thing to recognize, which wasn't said, is the most important thing we're building is the memorial, that beautiful state which will allow the city, the state, the nation to gather and to remember exactly those terrible attacks. That's why the notion that you could bring the Twin Tower back, take out almost four billion dollars worth of infrastructure that's already been built, you know, tear that out --

SHUSTER: Four billion dollars? I've heard about a billion dollars.

Maybe you can provide publicly how the four billion dollars is spent. Nobody else seems to know. Again, the issue—you're right, the memorial is terrific. It's going to be a magnificent memorial. The question is, do you want a memorial people that walk under the ground to, which is the 9/11 memorial, and that's fine? Or do you want a memorial that says, you know what, the Twin Towers were icons recognized around the world? The Freedom Towers is a design that's not recognized around the world, and a lot of people, frankly, don't like.

WARD: Look at the history of the city of New York. The city of New York rebuilds itself every 25 years. The amount of beautiful architecture that we're bringing back to the site, recognizing what the World Trade Center was before, is the new vision for downtown. Not only will you have the Freedom Tower; you'll have three beautiful buildings designed by three of the greatest architects in the world, recreating a new vital downtown, speaking to the past, but perhaps more importantly, leading us forward in a way that is rejuvenating, which is of a rebirth, which will bring the financial services industry back to downtown, will be part of a 24/7 integrated community.

We don't need to always look back to remember what happened to the United States and what's happened to New York City. Sometimes we actually have to look forward.

SHUSTER: Right, except looking forward, Christopher, when you build four different buildings, different sizes and shapes, that costs a lot more than building two Twin Towers that are essentially mirror images of each other, and that have economies of scale.

WARD: There was much debate about what would be going on downtown, how would you build it? What would the cost estimates be? We have a plan now. This is the important thing. We have to plan now that can be built. We need to move on. We have a design. We have a construction team. We have a commitment. We have funding.

The key thing is to make sure downtown comes back as quick as possible.

SHUSTER: Isn't the key thing to remember what the 9/11 families want, what the police want, what the firefighters want? So many people said, you know what, the Twin Towers were icons. If America wants to say we're back, let's build the Twin Towers. And, again, you mentioned four billion dollars that's been spent. How is that possible? Because when you look at the site, there's nothing really there. There's some building about 30 feet off the ground and there's a lot of stuff underground. Four billion dollars for that?

WARD: You have to understand that when I said four billion dollars, we had to take that site, excavate it, build temporary pass stations, create the system that allows these buildings to get now built. We've already purchased almost 1.4 billion dollars of one World Trade Center.

I want to come back to the fundamental question you asked, in terms of whether or not the architecture of the World Trade Center is the only way to remember this site. It can't be the only way to remember the site, in the same way that New York has rebuilt itself time and time again. The point of this plan is that it integrates a community, a memorial, a real estate and a financial industry that must return.

I think if you look at where New York City will be 20, 30 years from now, we will look back proudly and see what actually got built there.

SHUSTER: It's a great point you make, Christopher. Again, congratulations on the memorial. Again, the memorial would be part of the Twin Tower site. I—

(CROSS TALK)

SHUSTER: Let me finish and you can make a point. If somebody burned down the Capitol, if somebody burned down the White House, we wouldn't redesign the Capitol with modern architecture. We wouldn't rebuild the White House and make it a different color.

WARD: In that case, I think you're dealing with, you know, national monuments, as opposed to real estate—

SHUSTER: Weren't the Twin Towers worldwide monuments, a symbol of American capitalism and the can-do spirit? Maybe we disagree on that—

WARD: I want to go back to one important thing. You can't have the memorial where it is, what it will be and bring back the Twin Towers. You just can't do that. I also want to—

SHUSTER: Well, the designer of the Twin Tower plan, Christopher, says you can. He says he showed you the plan and said you can keep the 9/11 memorial as it is and build the Twin Towers around it.

WARD: You can't. This is one project. This is not discrete projects. The steel, the beautiful reflective pool, the water fall—it sits right in the middle of the site. You can't simply take everything else out and now expect that you can drop in the old footprints of the Twin Towers. It's not physically possible. And I think—

SHUSTER: His plan, though, keeps the footprints and, again, builds the Twin Towers essentially catty corner to them, and again, away from the West Side Highway. You would be able to have windows and floor to ceiling glass, as opposed to the Freedom Tower, I understand, is going to essentially have no windows up to the tenth floor, because it's so close to the West Side Highway?

WARD: The Freedom Tower has a beautiful base of crystalline glass that's going to be surrounded by the trees, mirroring the trees on the memorial. The iconic structure that we will have there will be a symbol, exactly like the Trade Centers were before, of downtown, of the strength of the real estate industry, of the certainty of the financial markets here in Lower Manhattan.

I think this is the vision that took many years to put in place. The key thing now is to not doubt, not look back, to make sure we're building and going forward. That's been my mission and that's what the Port Authority's mission is now.

We can't wait any longer. The debates are behind us. We have a plan. We think it fits with all of what Lower Manhattan needs, what the city and nation needs. And that's what we're building.

SHUSTER: Christopher Ward, good of you to joins us; 9/11 families obviously have a different view and so do the rest of us. But in any case, good of you to join us. You're a very articulate spokesman for what you're trying to do down there. We appreciate you coming on.

WARD: My pleasure.