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## Jail Towers 'Way Out of Scale' Says Head of Commission to Close Rikers



Jonathan Lippman, chair of the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform, speaks on Jan. 18 at New York Law School. Photo: Carl Glassman/Tribeca Trib

By CARL GLASSMAN

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The distinguished head of the commission that authored a blueprint for closing Rikers Island and replacing it with a jail in each borough says he strongly opposes the height of the facilities proposed by the city, calling them “way too tall” and “out of scale.”

That includes the one proposed for White Street, the site of the current Manhattan Detention Center, that could rise as high as 50 stories at the border of Tribeca and Chinatown.

Jonathan Lippman, former chief judge of the state’s highest court, said on Friday that his independent commission, which convinced Mayor Bill de Blasio to embark on an ambitious plan for creating a borough-based jail system, never envisioned the kind of high-rise facilities that now have communities up in arms.

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“Those buildings are way too tall. I don’t think you have to be a nuclear scientist or a jail designer to get it,” said Lippman, who chairs the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform—more commonly known as the Lippman Commission.

“And you know what?” he continued. “I’ve gone and spoken to these architects who build jails around the country and they’re very smart and they know how to do these things. They know how to do it in ways that serve the community. But yet they are not just so huge that they dwarf the community.”



Under the city's plan, the north and south towers of the Manhattan Detention Center (24 White Street, right, and 125 White Street) would be demolished and replaced by a jail as tall as 50 stories. Photo: Carl Glassman/Tribeca Trib

Responding to questions at New York Law School’s CityLaw Breakfast, Lippman said the city is trying to pack too many services and spaces into the buildings, which will house re-entry and other programs as well as space for visitation and recreation. “Those jails are many times the size, square footage per inmate, of anything in the country,” he said. “So what we’ve recommended to [the city] is that it’s a noble goal to put more community services and meeting rooms and whatever, but we can’t have buildings that are out of sync with where they are.”

De Blasio and other administration officials have said they are “working” to reduce the height of the Manhattan building, which could be triple the square footage of the current Manhattan Detention Center complex’s two buildings, 124 and 125 White Street. But so far they have cited only the maximum allowable height of 520 feet as a starting point.

A spokesman for the Mayor’s Office, Raul Contreras, declined to repond directly to Lippman’s remarks. In a statement, he said: “Our borough-based jails will integrate with the community and include space for some of the most innovative programs that will help overhaul a justice system that has failed too many. We’re working with the community to scale the project in a way that won’t sacrifice space for those innovative programs.”

Lippman, the former chief judge of the New York Court of Appeals, said he has spoken to “the highest levels of people in the city” about creating much lower buildings and he is optimistic that

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they will agree. He also encouraged opponents of the towers to voice their concerns at upcoming hearings that are part of the city mandated land use approval process.

The city’s plans, which call for a capacity of 1,500 detainees at each jail, have been met with heavy opposition in all four boroughs where new jails are proposed. The Queens House of Detention could triple in size and rise to more than 300 feet, while the Brooklyn Detention Complex could be replaced with a structure as tall as 430 feet. Many of the fiercest opponents of the Manhattan jail, first proposed for a potential 40-story facility at 80 Centre Street, are not mollified by the city’s decision to scrap that plan and potentially build a skyscraper jail on the site of the Manhattan Detention Center.

Despite his opposition to the towers, Lippman gave cold comfort to those who totally oppose the jails in their community, calling them “dead wrong.”

“To me, if you’re against local jails, you’re for Rikers Island,” he said. ”And Rikers Island is an abomination.”

By excluding Staten Island in the jail plan, the city ignored the Lippman Commission’s recommendation for a jail in all five boroughs. Critics say that belies the notion of equity in the borough-based system, and results in the need for bigger jails in the other four boroughs. The administration argues that fewer than 200 detainees will be coming from Staten Island, making a jail there logistically impractical and wasteful. (They also cite the desire for detainees to be close to family members, though they say they have yet to decide whether inmates will be housed in the borough where they live or where they are charged.)

Lippman offered his own reason why officials are keeping Staten Island out of the fray.

“It certainly doesn’t help when the administration, for political purposes, says they’re not going to build a jail in Staten Island,” he said.

A draft environmental impact statement, an analysis of potential neighborhood impacts from the proposed jail project, will be issued on March 25. The six-month-long land use review begins in April, with public hearings before the community boards, borough presidents, City Planning Commission, and City Council.

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