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Not Quite a Candidate, Lhota Walks Fine Line

By Ted Mann

By Joseph Lhota's own stated standard, his status as a candidate for mayor is a foregone conclusion: he'd never have stepped down as the head of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority if he wasn't going to run.

But Lhota, a Republican and former deputy mayor under Rudolph Giuliani, isn't quite a candidate yet. So Monday's speech to the New York Building Congress at the Mandarin Oriental hotel at Columbus Circle required a bit of delicacy.



PJ Smith for The Wall Street Journal
Joseph Lhota makes an announcement at Grand Central Terminal in December.

The then-chairman had been invited to talk about superstorm Sandy and the MTA's infrastructure needs before he stepped down to launch a mayoral bid. Lhota kept the appointment Monday, but struggled, in the crush of reporters who followed him out of the luncheon hall, to stick to the message that he wasn't a candidate, just someone very likely to be one soon.

"I think later this week I should be a full-fledged, filed candidate," he said, as he and an aide waited for an elevator, surrounded by insistent reporters.

Why couldn't he say more than that, one reporter wanted to know. After all, from the dais overlooking hundreds of people in a 36th-floor ballroom above Central Park, Lhota had asked

them to consider his future job prospects – and his much-lauded tenure at the MTA – by citing William Shakespeare’s “The Tempest”: ‘What’s past is prologue.’

“Imagine what I can do in my future with a much more complex organization,” he said then, drawing a chuckle in the room. That did not mean he was willing to elaborate for reporters afterward.

“We’re done, we’re not doing this right now, guys,” the aide protested.

“I’m not going to talk about the campaign until I have filed as a candidate,” he insisted, adding a plea. “I’d like to go downstairs and go back to work.”

It wasn’t just the press that was proving a headache. As MTA chairman, Lhota was eased in his travels through crowded meeting rooms by an ever-present — and armed — New York police officer. That service might have sped his exit on Monday.

And even in recounting his experience in the job he left, Lhota risked causing future headaches in the job he is now — assuredly, if not yet officially — going to take up, that of a mayoral candidate.

Recounting the MTA’s rush to return some subways to service just 36 hours after the end of superstorm Sandy, he noted that the MTA might have done so earlier, if Consolidated Edison had been able to more quickly restore electricity in lower Manhattan.

As the line left his lips, Lhota stopped himself, and chuckled, “Sorry,” to Con Ed, to the amusement of the others in the room.

“I’m going to go back to them for contributions,” Lhota said, “so I’ll apologize later.”