

CRAIN'S

NEW YORK BUSINESS

July 21, 2014

The city job that nobody wanted

Care to be the new buildings commissioner? Neither did they

BY DANIEL GEIGER

More than six months after he took office—and hours before departing for a 10-day family vacation in Italy—Mayor Bill de Blasio stepped to the microphones in City Hall on the afternoon of July 17 to announce he had filled the last major vacancy in city government. Rick Chandler, an assistant vice president for facilities at Hunter College, was named commissioner of the Department of Buildings.

“The stakes of this work are incredibly high,” said the newest commissioner in a statement, noting that the department’s work extends from “making sure New Yorkers’ homes and workplaces are safe” to helping “get more affordable housing and job-creating construction underway.”

In fact, the very complexity of the job and the heavy workload that goes with it—especially now, as construction activity in the city ramps up to new heights—is what made the post so difficult to fill. A long list of top candidates passed on the job, including Robert Benazzi, a

former top executive at a big engineering firm; Susan Hinkson, a commissioner at the city’s Board of Standards and Appeals; Aine Brazil, an executive at engineering company Thornton Tomasetti; and Patricia Lancaster, a former buildings commissioner in the Bloomberg administration.

Striking a balance

“You have to be fair, you have to be flexible, you have to have nerves of steel and be able to deal with the pressures of development, which are tremendous,” said Robert LiMandri, who, as is customary, stepped down as buildings commissioner when the new administration took office. “It can be a very rewarding job, but you have to find the right person, and that’s incredibly difficult.”

To begin with, Mr. Chandler will have to strike the right balance between the department’s often opposing objectives of policing the industry while doing all it can to avoid strangling those firms in red tape.

The New York Building Congress, whose members include major engineering and construction companies as well as developers, estimates that \$33.4 billion in con-

struction projects will get underway this year, a pipeline expected to grow to a record-shattering \$37 billion in 2015. For the DOB, that means an avalanche of permits to process while making sure all those new construction sites are safe. Both tasks will have to get done without a hitch in order to keep one of the city’s biggest economic drivers on track.

A rising crop of slender, thousand-foot-plus apartment towers, taller and thinner than anything

‘You have to be fair, and you have to have nerves of steel’

ever built in the city, will also pose technical and safety issues for the DOB. The fact that units in those spires will sell for tens of millions of dollars and be occupied by some of the world’s richest people will further increase the stakes riding on the agency’s performance.

“The balancing act is probably

tougher than ever,” said Ms. Lancaster, a former DOB head who now runs her own consulting practice and teaches at the NYU Schack Institute of Real Estate. “It’s magnified in this residential market because now everything is worth so much.”

And on top of everything else, Mr. Chandler will have to do more with fewer resources. Ms. Lancaster noted that the DOB has about 1,000 staffers, nearly 30% less than it had when she was in office from 2002 to 2008—although some of that reduction owes to a switchover to a labor-saving digital system for issuing permits.

By industry standards, he won’t be well compensated. He will have to take on the job’s monumental responsibilities for \$205,000 a year, far less than what he would expect to earn in a top position in the private sector.

“This is not a job done by people who want to make a ton of money,” Mr. LiMandri said. “You have to find the right person who’s motivated by doing the right thing for the city.”

This time around, City Hall has also set especially high expectations for the position. The mayor’s office envisions the DOB commissioner not only as the construction indus-

tougher than ever,” said Ms. Lancaster, a former DOB head who now runs her own consulting practice and teaches at the NYU Schack Institute of Real Estate. “It’s magnified in this residential market because now everything is worth so much.”

And on top of everything else, Mr. Chandler will have to do more with fewer resources. Ms. Lancaster noted that the DOB has about 1,000 staffers, nearly 30% less than it had when she was in office from 2002 to 2008—although some of that reduction owes to a switchover to a labor-saving digital system for issuing permits.

By industry standards, he won’t be well compensated. He will have to take on the job’s monumental responsibilities for \$205,000 a year, far less than what he would expect to earn in a top position in the private sector.

“This is not a job done by people who want to make a ton of money,” Mr. LiMandri said. “You have to find the right person who’s motivated by doing the right thing for the city.”

This time around, City Hall has also set especially high expectations for the position. The mayor’s office envisions the DOB commissioner not only as the construction indus-



GETTY IMAGES

MAN WITH A MISSION: Buildings Commissioner Rick Chandler has much to do.

try’s top sheriff, but also a visionary who will play a key role in the administration’s signature effort to create 80,000 new units of affordable housing during the next decade.

Drilling down on building code

“There are certain aspects of the building code that could warrant review and that perhaps could be streamlined or simplified to save money and make affordable housing more financially feasible to build,” said Denise Richardson, president of the General Contractors Association. “The buildings commissioner will be an important part of that effort.”

To hit the bold affordability

goals, Mr. Chandler may need to rewrite the code to permit new kinds of housing, such as micro-units, that the Bloomberg administration experimented with.

“The new commissioner is going to have to take a hard look at the building code and revise it to allow for smaller housing units,” said Frank Sciame, a construction executive who was approached by the Bloomberg administration in 2008 to head the department but turned the job down. “The microhousing was a great effort, but I think it should go further.”

One of the key assets that Mr. Chandler brings to his new job is a deep knowledge of the issues and institutions he will be working with. For the past six years, he has been an assistant vice president for facilities at Hunter College.

Early in his career, he spent 15 years at the Department of Buildings, where he rose to the level of borough commissioner of Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx and a deputy commissioner of Manhattan, before he left in 1995. Mr. Chandler then served as an executive at the city’s Department of Homeless Services beginning in 2002 before leaving to join Hunter College in 2008.

Mr. Chandler did not respond to a request for comment. ■



LISTEN to a discussion at CrainsNewYork.com/podcasts