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Former Port Authority heads chide governors for political hires, question agency's involvement in WTC project

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By Steve Strunsky/The Star-Ledger

NEW YORK — A panel of three former executive directors of the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey this morning weighed in on a wide range of topics related to the agency, including questioning the agency's involvement in the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site and the raising of the Bayonne Bridge.

The three panelists, Robert Boyle, Stephen Berger and Peter Goldmark, also proposed ideas for generating new policies and projects, including congestion pricing for trucks throughout the region and an electric "smart grid" to more efficiently power the bi-state area.

Boyle was appointed by Gov. George Pataki and served from 1997-2001; Berger, an appointee of Mario Cuomo, served from 1985 to 1990; and Goldmark, an appointment of Hugh Carey, served from 1977 to 1985.

The agency's former executive director, Christopher Ward, who was succeeded last fall by Patrick Foye, also attended the meeting and spoke informally.

The event was hosted by the Citizens Budget Commission, a private, non-partisan civic group, at the New York City Bar Association in Manhattan.

Some officials expressed concern about the increasing number of political appointees at the agency by governors of the two states.

Gov. Chris Christie directed 39 hires in his first year in office alone, far more hires made at the agency than by any of his predecessors, and Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York has also directed a number of hires.

"When I was at the Port Authority, there were very few political appointees," Boyle said. "I think you could count the New York appointees on one hand and you could count the New Jersey appointees on the other."

But current Port Authority officials say making the agency more transparent has been a priority of both governors.

Berger questioned that assertion.

"There are two guys in the Northeast who love the lack of transparency and one lives in Trenton and one lives in Albany," he said.

Berger also chided governors of the two states historically for using the Port Authority as “a money tree” to directly or indirectly solve their states’ respective financial problems.

Goldmark said he agreed with Berger that the Port Authority should “get out of the World Trade Center adventure,” wondering aloud whether the multibillion-dollar real-estate investment was appropriate or wise for the agency.

Boyle questioned the wisdom of spending more than \$1 billion to raise the Bayonne Bridge, a project intended to allow bigger container ships to access terminals in Newark and Elizabeth via the Kill Van Kull, the strait between Staten Island and Bayonne.

Even with the bridge raised, Boyle said the narrow kull would be “a treacherous” waterway for the world’s biggest vessels, and he suggested the ships simply be routed to existing terminals in Jersey City and Bayonne where the Port Authority has already committed to expansion plans.

All three acknowledged that the Port Authority had serious revenue problems, resulting from the recent recession and slow recovery. Ward suggested that “the Port Authority is fundamentally underwater financially.”

Ward, though, also proposed a new initiative he said would help address the agency’s financial problems as well as the critical issue of improving the flow of truck traffic around the region, something like congestion pricing for commercial vehicles.

Although the scheme would provide a net boost in Port Authority revenues, Ward said, it would also improve the flow of truck traffic, something he said is critically important to the economic health of the region.

One of the most dramatic suggestions of the morning came from Goldmark, whom Boyle described as the visionary among them.

Goldmark proposed that the Port Authority get into the electricity business, joining with regional utilities to create a “smart grid” that would improve the efficiency of power distribution throughout the region.

Goldmark put the cost of the grid at \$200 billion to \$300 billion over two to three decades.

He said the Port Authority could use its tax-exempt status to finance the project, largely with private dollars.

The project would pay for itself through savings realized by the more efficient grid, he suggested.

Goldmark also warned against an overemphasis on a return to the Port Authority’s so-called mission of enhancing transportation between the two states.

“Let me remind everybody in the room before we fall totally in love with this ‘core mission’,” Goldmark said. “The Port Authority’s greatest work has been when it’s done what wasn’t being done before.”