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MORE NEWS

Cop chief staying

Police Commissioner-designee Raymond Kelly has decided to retain Chief of Department Joseph Esposito as his top uniformed cop, the Daily News has learned.

Esposito, who was promoted to the four-star post by current Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik, is extremely popular with the rank-and-file and earned praise for his leadership after the World Trade Center attacks.

"He's staying on the merits," said a high-ranking NYPD official. "He has done a great job and is the best person for the job, and I think Kelly realizes that."

In choosing Esposito as his field general, Kelly will draw on his ability to motivate cops as the NYPD faces likely budget cutbacks and an avalanche of retirements.

Alice McQuillan and John Marzulli

Rudy, Council to talk

Under threat of a City Council rebellion, Mayor Giuliani agreed yesterday to begin negotiations with Council Speaker Peter Vallone over City Hall's proposed $766 million in budget cuts.

The cuts, part of Giuliani's plan to close a $1.2 billion gap, were presented to the Council late Tuesday without the behind-the-scenes negotiations that have paved the way for budget modifications in past years. The Council has until Jan. 9 to approve or reject Giuliani's plan, but it can't pick and choose which cuts to restore.

The proposed cuts include $26 million from libraries; $7.5 million from senior citizen programs, $3.6 million from supplemental school programs and $2.1 million from community-based cultural groups.

Ranking Vallone aides predicted yesterday that the mayor's plan would be rejected unless the mayor agrees to make changes.

Frank Lombardi

Ground Zero blast

A gas main explosion in the shadow of Ground Zero shattered windows and nerves yesterday in lower Manhattan.

Five people suffered minor injuries in the 2 p.m. blast at Rector and Washington Sts. Scores of area windows — in buildings and cars — were shattered in the explosion.

"There was a huge detonation, and then dirt and glass went flying everywhere," said Giovanni Natalucci, owner of Giovanni's Atrium restaurant on Rector St. "I thought it was another terrorist attack."

A valve in one of the area's replacement gas mains failed during repair work, causing the explosion, said Con Edison spokeswoman Joy Faber.

Jonathan Lemire

Air crash lawsuit

The family of a flight attendant killed aboard Flight 587 filed a wrongful death suit yesterday against American Airlines and Airbus.

The suit filed in Brooklyn Federal Court asks for unspecified damages for the family of Michele Mills, 46, of Long Island, a 23-year American Airlines veteran.

The Nov. 12 crash of the Airbus A300 shortly after takeoff from Kennedy Airport killed all 260 aboard and five people on the ground in Queens.

The family's attorney, Sanford Rubenstein, believes the crash was caused by a product defect.

"We're bringing this case not only for monetary damages, but to ensure this type of tragedy never happens again," he said.

An American Airlines spokeswoman declined comment. Airbus officials weren't reachable.

Mills loved her job but the family often worried about her safety, her sister Patricia said.

"She simply said, 'I pray when we take off and pray when we land, and I don't worry about the rest,' " Patricia Mills said.

Mike Claffey

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