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Johnnie Cochran in Deep Water

Johnnie Cochran will need more than courtroom skill to avoid the political land mines that await him in his new role as chairman of the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone. This publicly funded economic development agency has been hampered by ineffective leadership and political infighting among Albany, City Hall and the Democratic Congressman Charles Rangel, all of whom must approve every project that goes forward. To be effective, Mr. Cochran must dispel widespread suspicion that he was installed in this job to serve as Mr. Rangel's pawn.

In 1996 Harlem was made part of a federal empowerment zone that was supposed to spur a commercial renaissance over a 10-year period with a $300 million development fund and $250 million in tax incentives. The project was nearly scuttled at the start when the city and state fought bitterly over who would control the process. It was salvaged when the zone officials were able to fill their top posts with people who were trusted both at City Hall and in Albany.

With Richard Parsons, then president of Time Warner Inc., as chairman of the board and Deborah Wright, the city housing commissioner and former investment banker, as executive director, the empowerment zone played a crucial role in establishing the Harlem USA retail development, which contains the first movie theaters to open in Harlem in more than 50 years as well as a successful Old Navy store.

The Giuliani administration viewed the zone with suspicion, as a kind of sandbox for Mr. Rangel's political machine to play in. The alienation between the zone and City Hall only worsened after Ms. Wright left for the private sector. Her replacement, Terry Lane, has accomplished little and come under criticism for his style of doing business. In addition to a new chairman, the zone may need a new executive director and more effective liaison at City Hall.

Mr. Cochran is a popular figure on the streets of Harlem. But the job he has been appointed to requires a considerable time commitment, and many in the Harlem business establishment have criticized the empowerment zone for hiring one of the busiest lawyers in the nation, who oversees 10 law offices around the country. Many suspect that Mr. Rangel wants an absentee chairman so that he can run the zone himself. To succeed at this job Mr. Cochran will need to refute these suspicions and convince everyone involved that he is working not just for some local pols but to rebuild an economically battered community.

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