

# WIN

## BUSINESS

September 2005

### Sam Schwartz

President & CEO

Sam Schwartz of Canada

The sun had not risen yet when the phone rang at 4 a.m. on April 1, 1980. The night dispatcher at the New York City Traffic Control Room said that the transit workers had gone on strike. My first reaction was, "April Fool." But, in a no-nonsense voice, I was told to be downstairs in 10 minutes. A police helicopter was going to land near my house in Brooklyn and whisk me into Manhattan to take command of the crippled transportation system. It was my job to see that more than eight million people would be able to get to work, shop, go to school and go about their daily routines. Once in the chopper I asked the pilot to take me to the suburbs. It was now about 4:30 a.m. I could see the lights being turned on in a few of the houses. I thought these people have no idea what's about to hit them. We then headed straight to police headquarters in Manhattan; the chopper landed on the roof and I went down two flights to "strike central" - a room that would become my home for the next two weeks. The mayor had invoked emergency powers in effect giving me the authority to direct 10,000 police officers and nearly 300,000 other city employees as I saw fit. In the hours and days that followed my "troops" added an entrance lane to the Brooklyn Bridge, set up bicycle lanes throughout the city, banned driver-only cars from entering Manhattan and dedicated streets to privately owned buses that were contracted by big business. Like an orchestra leader I directed changes to the traffic signals in the city in response to conditions. Bridge and tunnel lanes were reversed or closed on cue. Highway ramps became staging areas for car pooling. During the third day of the strike a reporter overheard me use the word "gridlock." It had never been used before publicly and by day's end reporters everywhere were calling and asking me about it. The next day William Safire, the author of the NY Times On Language column, called me for the word's origin. Dictionaries and encyclopedia's followed suit; the word was a "hit" The strike lasted 11 days with over 90 per cent of the people making it to work. In appreciation, the next year Mayor Ed Koch offered me my dream job - NYC traffic commissioner.

