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Calatrava, Terrorism and West Street

The Little Tunnel That Couldn't

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For the past three years, the Coalition to Save West Street (www.SaveWestStreet.com) has fought the Governor's plan to divert one billion dollars of dwindling federal 9/11 funds to a pet project that no one can seem to justify — a scheme to bury four of the eight lanes of West Street for a four-block stretch between Vesey and Liberty Streets.

Enter Santiago Calatrava

Last week, *Bloomberg News* reported that famed Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, who is designing the future World Trade Center transit hub, has been called in to design the entrance to the proposed West Street tunnel. Bringing in Sr. Calatrava as a one-man rescue squad for this wasteful and unnecessary scheme seems to be an act of desperation by the dwindling band of tunnel proponents. The perceived need to put some lipstick on this pig would appear to reflect the determined opposition of New York-based investment bank Goldman Sachs, which hopes to build its new forty-story headquarters on a site that would front one of the proposed tunnel's dangerous and unsightly ramps.

Goldman Sachs' position has validated the existing and ardent opposition to the proposed tunnel by the Downtown community, environmental and transit groups, elected officials, and Community Board 1. While we are disappointed that state officials are bending over backwards to address the complaints of a major corporation, after ignoring three years of community protests, it only underscores the point. Simply put, no rational person wants a tunnel ramp adjacent to his or her school, residence, office or neighborhood, for obvious reasons of health, safety and aesthetics.

The story announcing Sr. Calatrava's involvement also disclosed that, over three years into the process, tunnel proponents have concocted an entirely new rationale for their preconceived tunnel plan — supposed security concerns regarding the "Freedom Tower" to be built adjacent to West Street between Vesey and Fulton Streets.

Original Tunnel Rationales

By our count, this is at least the third proffered justification for this billion-dollar boondoggle. First, proponents promised that a tunnel would be topped by a park which would "reconnect" Battery Park City to the rest of Lower Manhattan. Never mind that residents had not complained of any "disconnection" prior to 9/11. Now, of course, we know that there will be no park atop the tunnel, just clogged local traffic lanes with a slightly wider median. In exchange for this trivial bit of additional green space, residents, including children on their way to and from local schools and ball fields, will be forced to cross West Street in front of dangerous tunnel ramps with emerging traffic, breathing exhaust fumes being blown out of the tunnel portals by giant fans.

When local residents said, in effect, "thanks but no thanks" — packing public hearings and flooding politicians with letters, calls, and emails opposing the tunnel — the scheme remained the same, but the excuse for it changed. "Connectivity" was dropped. Instead, the rationale became all about creating a peaceful setting for the future WTC memorial. Who could possibly oppose such a noble goal? As memorial plans advanced, however, it has become apparent that most of the contemplative activity in the winning design will occur below street level and away from traffic. The surface portion of the site adjacent to West Street will be more in the nature of a park. New York is replete with successful parks, e.g., Bryant Park, encircled by traffic. The shaky underpinnings of this rationale for a billion-dollar tunnel have thus become painfully apparent.

The Latest Rationale -- Terrorism

Only in the last few months of this three-year period have we heard mention of terrorism as a purported reason for building the tunnel. As with prior justifications, this rationale does not hold up to even the most superficial of analyses.

We begin by noting the absurdity of spending one billion dollars in public funds (the cost of the proposed West Street tunnel) to add some small measure of security to a private office building that will cost only a bit more than that. It raises the question as to whether there are not more cost-effective ways to provide effective security for the building. Of course there are! We will discuss some of those security measures below.

We further note that, if this were truly a valid concern, it would mandate that Vesey and Fulton Streets also be buried. Under the current WTC site plan, these streets will carry traffic in as close proximity to the Freedom Tower as West Street. The fact that we are not reading of Vesey and Fulton Street tunnels speaks volumes as to the lack of sincerity with which state officials are advancing this new security argument.

In addition, a look around New York shows that there are numerous landmark buildings which are potential terrorist targets but which still have adjacent traffic. An obvious case in point is the Citigroup Center on Lexington Avenue. The building is the symbol of a major American-based multinational bank, and the entire structure rests quite visibly on stilts. While some street controls were put in place around that building during the pre-election terrorist scare, traffic now passes by on all four sides. There are many other examples, but the key point is that we cannot sustain New York as a vital and successful urban center if we start closing off and tunneling streets that happen to go by potential terrorist targets. Perfect security is an impossible goal in a major city like New York, but there are reasonable, common sense steps that can be taken.

A Better Solution

To begin with, rather than spending one billion dollars to buy a few extra feet between West Street and the Freedom Tower, an obvious alternative solution would be to build a barrier between the building and the roadway made of bomb-absorbent materials. This could be done for a fraction of the cost of the proposed tunnel, and likely would be more effective than a few extra feet of separation. If the response is that such a structure would detract from the aesthetics of the area, our response is, "Put Sr. Calatrava to work on it!" Rather than wasting this famed architect's considerable talents on a futile effort to make the portal to the West Street tunnel resemble the entrance to Disneyland, we propose that state officials engage him to help with the design of barriers and other sensible security measures that are compatible with an at-grade West Street boulevard.

Other security measures could include structural reinforcement of the lower floors of the building. We understand that Citigroup has taken this approach with respect to the street-level columns that support its midtown building discussed above. Building design, such as the selection of construction materials, should be done with security foremost in mind. There is also the obvious step of using steel safety bollards along the sidewalks to prevent vehicles from approaching the building from the roadway (a solution employed by the World Financial Center across the street). And we note that there is room to shift even an eight-lane West Street further to the west if necessary. All of these techniques in combination, along with some other ones security experts are doubtless aware of but we have not considered, would be much more effective than a tunnel.

Finally, it must be emphasized that an automobile tunnel under West Street would present its own serious security problems. There is a good reason why tunnels in the City are closed down or additional security measures implemented during terrorist alerts. Traffic tunnels have been identified in the past as major potential terrorist targets. A terrorist setting off a truck bomb in such an enclosed space during heavy rush hour tunnel traffic could endanger many more people than a similar bomb at street level. Also, such a tunnel would run alongside the slurry wall that keeps the waters of the Hudson River out of Lower Manhattan, and an explosion in the tunnel could breach that wall. We were very lucky on 9/11 that the fragile slurry wall withstood the attack on the World Trade Center. Do we want to expose ourselves again to that same risk?

We reiterate again that the answer for West Street is obvious. Listen to the voices of those of us who live and work in the area. Implement an at-grade solution with adequate security measures for the Freedom Tower. Shift the hundreds of millions of dollars in Federal transit funds that would be freed up to another project that will make a positive contribution to the economic development of Lower Manhattan.

We are the survivors of 9/11. We returned to our homes and our offices in the aftermath of that colossal tragedy to rebuild Lower Manhattan. We will brook no further harm to our community, particularly not for political pork barrel. We therefore ask the Governor to choose cooperation, not litigation, as the path toward a better West Street.