

TO BE OR NOT TO BE: WEST STREET TUNNEL DRAMA ASSUMES SHAKESPEAREAN PROPORTIONS

Congressman Nadler Joins Anti-Tunnel Forces

Promenade of Trees and Cafes Could
Transform West Street Below Albany Street

Why are so many people in Battery Park City protesting the idea of tunneling West Street, when the rest of the city seems to think it's such a great idea?

The four West Street rebuilding options presented six months ago by the state Department of Transportation have been winnowed to two: a bypass tunnel from Vesey to Liberty Streets, and a reconstruction of the street — otherwise known as Route 9A — at grade with no tunnel.

The short bypass alternative is estimated to cost \$860 million, take two years to design, and up to three years to build. In this scenario, four lanes of express traffic would be depressed in front of the World Financial Center between Vesey and Liberty Streets, and four lanes of local traffic would remain at grade. Tunnel ramps would begin at Murray and Albany Streets. Local traffic lanes would be divided by a wide, planted median, often described as a green link between the World Trade Center site and the World Financial Center. A 30-foot wide sidewalk would be built along the WTC site. Officials believe about 15,000 vehicles per day would use the local lanes and 45,000 vehicles per day would use the tunnel.

The at-grade alternative of eight lanes of traffic (four in each direction) would cost \$175 million, take one year to design, and 18 months to build. Turning lanes would be built at Liberty and Vesey Streets, and the median between north and southbound traffic would be narrower. Officials estimate 60,000 vehicles per day would use this portion of Route 9A. In a presentation to Community Board 1 on June 9, new bridges were mentioned for crossings at Murray and Morris Streets.

The DOT is also proposing a landscaped promenade from Albany Street to Battery Place on both sides of the highway that would add \$140 million to the bill. On the west side, the lawns, community gardens, and playground of Battery Park City would be rebuilt, and a one-acre triangular park would be planted, its tip at Second Place and its base near historic Battery Park. On the east side of the street, the sidewalk would be widened to 40 feet and planted with double or even triple rows of trees. DOT designers imagine cafes, art galleries, and shops dotting the shady area.

Governor George Pataki favors the tunnel option. “Separating through and local traffic will significantly minimize traffic and noise at the World Trade Center site and allow for a favorable environment for pedestrians and visitors to the memorial. This design would help to strengthen the relationship between Battery Park City and the World Trade Center site,” reads a passage in a DOT brochure on the subject.

The governor is challenged by some downtown residents, some local officials (including Congressman Jerrold Nadler, City Council member Alan Gerson and borough president C. Virginia Fields), and certain civic groups (including R.DOT, the American Automobile Association of NY, the Clean Air Campaign, and the NYC Straphanger’s Campaign).

Downtowners opposing the construction of a tunnel banded together last year and formed the Coalition to Save West Street. Among the most persuasive of the coalition’s arguments is that spending \$860 million to create a four-block tunnel would be a grave misuse of funds. As put forth by coalition chair John Dellaportas and vice chair Bill Love, the nearly \$700 million that would be saved by rebuilding the street at grade could be redirected to “more critical priorities,” such as the Second Avenue subway or Hudson River Park.

In a statement addressed to the DOT, Mr. Love listed problems likely to result from tunnel ramps, including questionable left turns from southern BPC onto northbound West Street, concentration of fumes at ramp openings, “visual blight,” and pedestrian safety. “Drivers tend to speed up in a tunnel and emerge at the other end in a situation with limited peripheral vision,” he said. “This will be especially dangerous with respect to the ramp exit near Murray Street, with several schools in close proximity.”

At the June 9 public meeting, DOT officials acknowledged that the short bypass and its ramps are a design challenge. No one wants the entrances to a West Street tunnel to look like those on Park Avenue at 33rd Street. “That’s truly a no person’s land,” said project manager Rich Schmalz.

But, trying to bolster the DOT’s case for the tunnel, he said, “The tunnel is less about making cars move better and more about separating pedestrians from vehicles.”

The Coalition to Save West Street does not accept this reasoning. “We know what is best for our community. We are the survivors of 9/11. We were evacuated, we returned, and we endured 20 months of hardship to rebuild our community. We have carefully studied all DOT plans and concluded that a West Street tunnel would further diminish our quality of life. This we will not allow,” Mr. Dellaportas wrote to Mr. Schmalz in a letter dated June 23. “We ask you to consider our appeal. Please do not underestimate our resolve. We will stop this tunnel, whether it be in the political arena or in the courts.”

According to a DOT spokesperson, the choice between the short bypass and the at-grade alternatives will be made in the fall of 2004. For more information, see www.route9a.info. Comments may be mailed to Richard Schmalz at the state DOT office at 21 South End Ave., NYC, 10280.