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Debate begins on shorter West St. tunnel

By: Josh Rogers

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Downtown Express photo by Lorenzo Cinglio

Pedestrians wait to cross West St. at Vesey St., the site where a proposed West St. tunnel might begin.

The idea of building a long Downtown tunnel at West St. seems pretty much dead and buried, but a shorter, sub-pedestrian roadway adjacent to the World Trade Center site is still being actively considered by the powers that be and is being opposed by the leaders of the group that formed to sink the long tunnel.

The Coalition to Save West St., a group of Battery Park City residents who organized themselves last year, released a report over the weekend criticizing the short tunnel between Vesey and Liberty Sts., the equivalent of a four-block area.

Bill Love, the coalition's vice chairperson who helped write the report, said a shorter tunnel would still limit access to the neighborhood and be disruptive to build. Love said one of the best things about the pedestrian North and South Bridges, which connected B.P.C. to the World Trade Center, was that they were weather-protected.

He compared a West St. tunnel to the tunnel on Park Ave. between 33rd and 41st Sts., which he said was unsafe and a visual nightmare.

"You'd have a blighting effect with a lot of signs," Love said. "It'll be ugly."

But not everyone who supported the coalition on its opposition to a longer tunnel from Chambers St. to Battery Park shares the coalition's position on a shorter tunnel. Love said the group's executive board of 12 members agrees, but he has not yet polled the coalition's other members.

Tom Goodkind, who wrote an op-ed piece for the coalition last year, said he is open to hearing more about what he described as a "tiny" tunnel.

"It's fine as long as it doesn't disrupt the community for a long time," said Goodkind, who is no longer active in the group. But he remains convinced that the long tunnel would be terrible for Battery Park City. "It would be a lockdown of the area," he added. "It would almost be ruinous to the neighborhood. That's our artery. We can't leave unless West St. is open."

Sudhir Jain, a B.P.C. tenant leader and another long tunnel opponent, said recently he was also open to the shorter tunnel.

Officials with the state Dept. of Transportation, which will have the lead role in the decision for West St., also known as Route 9A, sees the shorter thoroughfare as a possible way to make the major roadway that will pass near the Sept. 11 victim's memorial less obtrusive.

Tim Gilcrest, D.O.T.'s director of planning, said at a Community Board 1 meeting in November that since the W.T.C. site and Battery Park City were higher than West St., it was possible to create the effect of a tunnel by depressing West St. by only a few feet and building a pedestrian deck. He did not give a cost estimate for this option and D.O.T. spokespersons did not return calls seeking comment.

Gilcrest made it clear no decision had been made, although he did appear to be quite skeptical of a long tunnel, since by his estimates, only 35 percent of the West St. vehicles would use a long, \$3-billion tunnel. Another option under consideration would be to rebuild the two pedestrian bridges over the roadway to restore the pre-9/11 situation.

The state expects to spend about \$150 million just to make permanent repairs to the highway, which was badly damaged when the Twin Towers collapsed. The temporary roadway near the site was installed quickly in order to reopen the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel last spring.

The pedestrian deck idea with no surface traffic was adopted in two of the nine architectural design ideas proposed for the W.T.C. site - one by Foster and Partners and the second by the team, that includes Richard Meier. Peterson/Litenberg proposes a short tunnel with surface traffic and the other six concepts have pedestrian decks.

Meier said his group's plan would allow tour buses and delivery trucks to enter the W.T.C. site easily and not clog the streets.

Alexander Garvin, the Lower Manhattan Development Corp.'s chief planner, said the plans, that include park space over West St., are "not so much a tunnel. They platform over to make it possible so you can walk directly from Church St. to the Winter Garden to cross West St."

Love said he opposes the deck as well as the short tunnel because of safety near the access ramp. "Obviously it's a matter of degree," he said. "Even the shallow one would have the ramp problem."

The coalition's report says the short tunnel would cause problems for the World Financial Center to get truck deliveries, but Larry Graham, senior vice president of Brookfield Financial Properties, owners of the W.F.C., disagreed.

Graham said the best option for the Financial Center is a longer tunnel, but a shorter one would also help ease pedestrian movement. "It was a problem and it continues to be difficult to get to the World Financial Center," Graham said of pedestrian access.

He did not like the large pedestrian deck idea because he said it would essentially put the first floors of the W.F.C. offices below ground.

Carl Weisbrod, who runs Lower Manhattan's Business Improvement District, said the "World Financial Center and its retail has been isolated" and something better than the pedestrian bridges needs to be built.

"It's important to connect the World Financial Center and integrate it with the larger Lower Manhattan central business district," said Weisbrod, who is president of the Downtown Alliance.

Timothy Carey, president of the Battery Park City Authority, consults regularly with all of the other agencies working on the decision. He said improving access to the neighborhood is the key, but if he has a recommendation as to which option is the best, he did not say.

His take on who will make the final decision:

"I assume it will be the state Dept. of Transportation in conjunction with the L.M.D.C., the Port Authority and the city," said Carey.

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