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West St. tunnel would be a wrong turn Downtown

The 800-pound gorilla that wanted to build the 740-foot tower Downtown spoke this week: Goldman Sachs is backing away from its plan to build its headquarters across the street from the World Trade Center site in Battery Park City. What divides the headquarters site and the W.T.C., as well as Goldman and Gov. Pataki, is West St. The governor wants a tunnel there and Goldman doesn't.

If the venerable investment bank — one of Lower Manhattan's most crucial institutions — nixes its plan to build an office skyscraper here and scales back its Downtown operations, the economic and psychological blows would be incalculable.

We understand some of the governor's desire for a tunnel — we want to make crossing the highway safer too — but more recently we have been saying the \$860 million projected cost of the tunnel (and we all know these costs rise with time) does not justify the potential benefits given all of the more pressing needs for Lower Manhattan. Keeping Goldman's development plans Downtown is the latest reason — but not the only one — not to build the tunnel.

More money is needed to build a Downtown rail link to J.F.K. Airport and the Long Island Rail Road, which, unlike the tunnel, would have substantial economic benefits for Downtown. The Lower Manhattan Development Corp. has \$800 million of 9/11 money left to help rebuild, and there are worthy demands that far exceed that amount. By coming up with a less costly solution for West St. we could save about \$650 million that could be shifted to the rail link and transportation-related projects such as waterfront improvements near highways.

Goldman doesn't want tunnel entrance ramps right outside the entrance to its building. So Pataki and his aides have been looking to move the so-called "portals to the Route 9A by-pass" north. The problems of that "solution" are enormous — it would concentrate traffic and fumes near P.S./I.S. 89 and the neighborhood's precious ballfields, it would balloon the project's costs, and it would likely require a whole new environmental impact statement setting the rebuilding efforts back even further.

Even if Goldman is bluffing, what would be the point of calling? There is virtually no public support for the tunnel anyway at this stage of economic triage.

And although it is far from the most important reason not to build the tunnel, it should not go without notice that Goldman has pledged \$4.5 million to Lower Manhattan residents to help pay for a library and community recreation center. It might seem like chump change in the scheme of billion-dollar decisions, but losing this community money will also be a blow.

It would be a blunder with heavy costs if Pataki let the Goldman deal slip away because he insists on a tunnel that has no constituency anymore. And even if he can find a way to have a tunnel and keep Goldman's two-million sq. ft. tower and 9000 employees on Site 26, there are better ways to spend \$860 million Downtown.