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State D.O.T. skeptical of long West St. tunnel

By: Josh Rogers

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State Transportation officials, without burying the idea explicitly, nevertheless expressed skepticism last week that a long tunnel on Route 9A would make economic sense.

Tim Gilcrest, the state Department of Transportation's director of planning, did not say he had ruled out a tunnel under the roadway, also called West St., from Chambers St. to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, but he cited two numbers which presumably would make it hard to convince D.O.T. to build the tunnel. One is the cost, which his agency estimates to be \$3 billion, not the \$2 billion some tunnel proponents cite. The second is the fact that the state estimates only 30 to 40 percent of the Downtown 9A traffic would choose the tunnel over the at-grade roadway that would be built above.

Gilcrest said during a Community Board 1 committee meeting Nov. 21 that the tunnel could go "as far north as your pocketbook and imagination will allow you to go," but he gave no indication that either went particularly far when it came to the tunnel. He was careful not to tip his hand on any of the four options the state has done preliminary studies on - a long tunnel, a short tunnel, a pedestrian deck over the roadway, or repairing the road to its current configuration. When one woman in the audience referred to the tunnel he wanted to build, he quickly interrupted to make sure the woman didn't think she had heard him say that.

One tunnel opponent, Bill Love, a Battery Park City resident who helped form the Save West St. Coalition earlier this year, said after the presentation from state officials, "I was encouraged. When someone asked them for reasons to do it, they didn't even attempt it. I feel much better."

The tunnel idea was initially embraced by many last year as a way to make it easier for pedestrians to enter and leave Battery Park City. But as questions arose about vehicular access, construction costs and disruptions, more and more opponents emerged. The Lower Manhattan Development Corp. favors a long green boulevard along the roadway, something that could include but does not require a tunnel underneath.

Alexander Garvin, the L.M.D.C.'s chief planner, said a few weeks ago that "the promenade was an idea that resonated." Garvin, who was testifying at a hearing called by Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, said, "we have heard from people in Battery Park City that they don't want to be in a construction area for the next 20 years."

The L.M.D.C. has asked planning teams working on the World Trade Center site to focus on only the five-block area of West St. which is adjacent to ground zero. A confusing set of state and city agencies will help decide the West St. question including state D.O.T., the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the L.M.D.C., the Hudson River Park Trust and the Battery Park City Authority.

When Assemblymember Deborah Glick asked Garvin who was "first among equals," he said it was likely state Transportation followed closely by the Port Authority. But he added that there must be a consensus with all of the agencies. "If you don't have all of these people together, it's not going to happen," said Garvin.

Gilcrest said at last week's meeting that "It's very complicated who owns what and where it all goes and we have to work together on that."

There is a concern among many about having a highway go right near the still-to-be-planned Sept. 11 memorial. As Gilcrest said, state Transportation hopes to create a "respectful setting for the memorial."

Transportation is also looking into a shorter tunnel right near the site. Gilcrest said this would be easier to do not only because it covers a shorter distance, but since the Trade Center was above street level, a short tunnel might involve depressing West St. by only two or three feet.

D.O.T. proposes to build a local, four-lane, two-way roadway over this shorter tunnel and estimates 65 to 75 percent of motorists would use the tunnel. Gilcrest said the reason most drivers would opt for the six-lane roadway that D.O.T. would build above a longer tunnel is because most vehicles that go on the Downtown portion of West St., either enter or exit between the Battery Tunnel and Chambers St. and would not find the tunnel convenient.

Nancy Owens, co-chairperson of C.B. 1's W.T.C. committee, said that since under its longer tunnel scenario, Transportation would only reduce the eight-lane roadway to a six-lane street, there would be little pedestrian gain from the change.

The longer tunnel would require five years to do an environmental study and design, and could be completed anywhere between three and six years after that, said Gilcrest.

The shorter tunnel has more support than a longer one, although Love said he opposes that as well and his group will soon have a position paper against it.

Timothy Carey, president of the B.P.C.A., said several months ago, that a short tunnel has appeal because it would form a better connection between the W.T.C. site and the Winter Garden in Battery Park City. He has not taken a position on a longer tunnel.

Gilcrest said Transportation is inclined to make changes on 9A, since prior to last year's terrorist attack over 10,000 pedestrians crossed the roadway below Chambers St. during a typical peak hour, outnumbering the 7,500 vehicles, according to their studies. Most pedestrians, 6,000, took the North Bridge, which was destroyed Sept. 11. About 2,000 took the South Bridge, which was rebuilt earlier this year, and 2,000 took their chances at the crosswalks at Vesey and Liberty Sts.

Most people at the meeting appeared to be against a long tunnel, but Lawrence Wassser, a Murray St. resident who used to live in Battery Park City, said he has difficulty walking and wanted to see a tunnel. He said most of the opposition was due to fear about disruption during construction. "I cross West St. at my own peril," he said. "I think if a tunnel was there, we would all welcome it."

Gilcrest said Transportation has an office in Battery Park City, which makes them well aware of the roadway. "Our staff crosses West St. every day," he said. "We understand the challenges."

A pedestrian deck, essentially a wider bridge, could be incorporated into the tunnel ideas, said Gilcrest.

His office has also fleshed out some of the grand boulevard ideas with drawings of sidewalk cafes and greenery along West St. Community Board 1 chairperson Madelyn Wils, who is on the board of the Hudson Park Trust and the L.M.D.C., said it may be difficult to get approval for the grand promenade since it and the B.P.C.A. control some of the land the L.M.D.C. may need to design and plan it.

Wils assured the audience that the L.M.D.C. is not considering construction buildings over a West St. tunnel, an idea previously proposed by several of the architects the L.M.D.C. picked to redesign the W.T.C. "The L.M.D.C. is not entertaining design ideas about building on West St.," said Wils.

Gilcrest said, at a minimum, D.O.T. would have to spend \$100 million to \$150 million in federal money just to maintain Route 9A at its current condition. Some of West St. was severely damaged Sept. 11, and a temporary roadway reopened last spring that allowed for the reopening of the Battery Tunnel. In order to fully repair the damage, Gilcrest said the \$100 million job will be needed.

He said any improvements to 9A would come out of a federal \$4.55 billion transportation fund for Lower Manhattan. The Port Authority and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority are also competing for these funds.

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