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Downtown Notebook

Lower Manhattan planning is moving too slowly

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Advanced search

News

- Top Stories
Downtown - September 2002
Editorial
Departments
Downtown Notebook
Downtown Days
Entertainment
Old New York
Parents and kids
Last Issue
Health
Sports
Downtown Express
Archives
Community Websites
City News Websites
Weather
National News

Business

Directory

Our Newspaper

Sports Wire!

Fun and Games

Consumer Guide

Personal Finance

Lifestyles

It has now been 15 months since the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Yet the future of Lower Manhattan, which bore the brunt of this horrific assault on all Americans, remains unsettled.

I was born in Lower Manhattan and have lived and worked here my entire life. From my earliest years as an assemblyman, in the late 1970s, I worked hard to nurture a vibrant, diverse and unified 24-hour residential and commercial community. In the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack, as we struggled to ensure our community's survival, Lower Manhattan became even more unified. Now, all of us who live, work, visit and attend school in Lower Manhattan must be involved in the planning and design of our community's future, and these plans must be responsive to our needs and concerns.

As speaker of the New York State Assembly, I know it is essential that the final design plan recognizes the area's dual role as an international capital of finance and telecommunications and also one of the city's fastest-growing residential neighborhoods. At the same time, the plan will need to incorporate a fitting memorial into a unified vision for Lower Manhattan - above ground and below, from river to river - and to address public safety, security needs and environmental considerations.

The plans for Lower Manhattan advanced recently by Mayor Bloomberg and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation contain many creative and imaginative ideas, but the feasibility of any of these designs is unclear. Furthermore, we have yet to see specifics: Fifteen months after 9/11, we are still just talking about concepts.

I am deeply concerned that these plans do not recognize the strength, unity and diversity of our existing residential communities. I also do not know what impact the existing community is going to have on the plans, and ultimately that is the most important point of all.

At a series of Assembly legislative hearings over the past year, we repeatedly heard testimony from city, state and federal agencies unwilling to take responsibility for important issues and unclear about what phases of the revitalization and rebuilding efforts they controlled. Recent press accounts confirm a problem that we identified months ago in our hearings: there is a significant rift between the L.M.D.C., part of the New York State Economic Development Corporation, and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

Despite this troublesome situation, some positive steps have already been taken. But the entire process of rebuilding and revitalizing Lower Manhattan has been moving too slowly, and it remains to be seen whether the existing governmental framework is truly up to the task.

To be successful, the planning and design process in the coming months and years should be guided by the following principles:

Given that top architects and designers from around the world are involved, the structures to be built on the World Trade Center site must be innovative, inspiring and fully integrated with surrounding neighborhoods. We are hopeful that the plans for these structures will come from one of the teams of architects currently working with the L.M.D.C.

Rebuilding on the site must incorporate a memorial that reflects the magnitude of the tragedy and is also a symbol of hope. The memorial, which should be connected to the larger community, must be developed through a design competition distinct from other redevelopment.

Lower Manhattan transportation improvements should include a major underground hub for subways, commuter rail and public transit links to JFK, LaGuardia and Newark Liberty airports. An underground terminal to accommodate tourist and commuter buses should also be created. Improvements to transportation infrastructure in Lower Manhattan must proceed simultaneously with other important projects, such as the Second Avenue Subway, which should be connected to the new Downtown transit hub.

The role of Lower Manhattan as the financial capital of the city, nation and the world must be maintained and enhanced. The New York Stock Exchange must remain at its current location, and we should encourage and support its expansion. Lower Manhattan is also a logical location to establish an innovative software center to assist the financial community and to nurture high-technology companies located in New York's Silicon Alley.

Lower Manhattan has one of the world's densest fiber optic telecommunications infrastructures and is generally regarded as the telecommunications capital of the world. As this sector of the infrastructure is rebuilt, it must be enhanced to provide the sophisticated redundancy and contingency systems that financial firms and other concerns now require.

Construction at locations other than the World Trade Center site must be planned and managed to cause minimal disruption to businesses and residents. Traffic noise and other negative impacts on the community must be mitigated through diligent monitoring and careful management.

Existing neighborhoods throughout Lower Manhattan should be enhanced, not redesigned. The community must be able to review any plans for long-term street closures or restrictions. Because this community has already experienced extreme duress, the construction process must minimize the disruption to existing residents and business. This will require compromise on the part of the planners.

At ground level, the street grid should include river-to-river east-west streets that facilitate traffic flow and accessibility without having a negative impact on residential neighborhoods. The plan should entail an area-wide parking strategy and provide for appropriate emergency and service vehicle access.

The roadway now known as West St. has evolved from a waterfront elevated highway into a forbidding expanse of ground-level, high-speed traffic that divides a vibrant and visually exciting community from the rest of the city.

The connection between Battery Park City and Lower Manhattan should be enhanced through the addition of enclosed weather-protected walkways or a pedestrian-friendly grand boulevard. The planning and design process must allow for careful cost and benefit evaluation of any proposed plans for West St.

Parks and recreational, educational and cultural facilities are vital in every community and need to be incorporated throughout Lower Manhattan. Specifically, a new neighborhood high school and community recreation center must be included in the rebuilding plan.

Planning efforts should also include the redevelopment of Governors Island as a multi-purpose community resource to include parks, ball fields and other much-needed recreational space. The planning process for the island must include representatives from the Lower Manhattan community as well as civic and environmental advocates.

The economic core of Lower Manhattan must be maintained as design, planning and rebuilding proceed. Economic revitalization programs must be continued and expanded as necessary. These programs should be tailored to the needs of small business, specific industries and other economic sectors within Lower Manhattan.

Proven state economic development strategies should be implemented in Lower Manhattan. For example, Chinatown must be designated as an Empire Zone, where businesses receive tax incentives for creating new jobs.

The federal government must provide funding for planning, design, revitalization and rebuilding projects.

The people of Lower Manhattan - and everyone who calls New York City and State and the entire metropolitan region home - require nothing less than clear, decisive leadership from those who bear the responsibility of restoring our unique and vibrant neighborhood.

Lower Manhattan is a place that to us and many others exemplifies the very essence of New York. By effectively restoring our community, we will be sending a message of strength to all Americans and to people throughout the world.

Sheldon Silver (D-Manhattan) is speaker of the New York State Assembly and his district includes the World Trade Center site.

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Reader Opinions

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Why do politicians never mention or address the WTC business people? There were >350 small businesses (<50) in the WTC. If the WTC was the core of its area, these business people and the business owners were the backbone of it to that point as the springboard. Disregarding the what-should-be-obvious sentimental and emotional factor of ensuring a WTC small biz owner gets whatever it takes to re-establish downtown, the purely logical perspective should require one to chase those people and beg them back. They know specifically. They know the turf, frequent local establishments, and wore down the path that became glorious sidewalks. It is pathetically infantile to ignore the richness they would provide to the rebuilding fabric. Or politics?

Number of Opinions: 1

1 - 1 of 1

Back to top



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