



## CHOKING DOWNTOWN

By STEVE CUOZZO

GOV. Pataki has again lost his footing on Downtown: Rather than pushing for the progress needed at Ground Zero, he seems intent on digging up West Street to build a worse-than-pointless auto tunnel.

Pataki's best moment on rebuilding came in April 2003, when he set out a firm timetable for Ground Zero and took steps to improve Downtown's abominable street and sidewalk conditions at once.

However belated, Pataki's decisiveness rescued the area — at least for a time — from the anti-commercial, post-9/11 clamor for a dubious paradise of "24/7" uses, "moderate-income" housing and a 16-acre shrine to America's sins. But now, nearly two years later, all the progress shows signs of unraveling.

The speeches, slide-shows and endless televised press conferences should fool no one. Despite last summer's cornerstone-laying, significant issues of infrastructure, financing and engineering must be resolved before the Freedom Tower can rise. The New York Times reported yesterday that the tower's broadcast-antenna spire — an integral part of the design unveiled a year ago — might not work as positioned at the building's corner.

In fact, sources tell The Post, it will likely need to be centered if it is not to tear the tower's roof off. (The currently-planned-but-untenable off-center antenna is a vestige of Daniel Libeskind's original design — a holdover included by Freedom Tower architect David Childs at Pataki's insistence.)

Until the problem is solved, Larry Silverstein can't build, no matter how much insurance money he has. Nor is there a hint of when work might start on the memorial. But until *both* projects are under way, no one will believe Ground Zero is going anywhere.

Consider, too, Pataki's failure to break the logjam over Fiterman Hall. With no agreement on a cleanup plan, the college building will remain a blackened hulk near Ground Zero on the *fourth* anniversary of 9/11.

Fixing or rebuilding Fiterman Hall will cost under \$200 million — peanuts for Downtown. Yet, while Pataki dawdles on it, he is putting his clout behind a *billion-dollar* scheme that has nothing to do with 9/11: the West Street tunnel, a dream come true for the forces still hoping to sabotage Downtown's recovery.

Supposedly meant to ensure the "sanctity" of the Ground Zero memorial, the project might well do what terrorists couldn't: Chase business out of Downtown for good.

It guarantees years of traffic and transit paralysis — plus a carnival of cost overruns. (For a taste of what's in store, ask any Bostonian about the "Big Dig," a highway project that ruptured their city, ran five years late and cost \$10 billion more than its \$2.6 billion estimate.)

Nor will the tunnel even deliver the promised insulation from vehicular traffic: Cars will still buzz by the memorial on three sides — on Liberty Street and on newly extended Greenwich and Fulton Streets.

Pataki's push for the project is doubly galling because, if the memorial is too close to West Street, he has only himself to blame. *He* chose the Libeskind master site plan, which shunted the memorial to Ground Zero's southwest quadrant.

In any event, if Pataki still insists on a buffer, one already exists: the wide, unused, two-lane service road just outside Ground Zero's western boundary. It provides plenty of elbow room to insulate the memorial from traffic.

(Also up in the air: where to place the tunnel's northern portal — and the ensuing traffic havoc. At Vesey Street, plunking impassable incisions on the doorstep of Goldman Sachs' new headquarters? A few blocks north, placing them in front of planned new apartment towers? )

The MTA's new Fulton Street Transit Center — the "Grand Central of Downtown" — promises subway riders years of inconvenience far worse than any posed by the existing station's shortcomings. Yet that disruption may seem pleasant compared with the job (perhaps a decade long) of depressing six-lane West Street under a landscaped median.

It's hard to imagine how a tunnel could be built without closing West Street during construction or, at best, reducing traffic to a trickle. That means rerouting cars and trucks east onto Church Street and Broadway. Both, of course, are already likely to be snarled for years — Church Street by construction of the new PATH terminal and Broadway by work on the Transit Center.

And has everyone forgotten that tunneling must also be done beneath Broadway and Church Street to link the PATH and transit centers underground, with unpredictable effects at street level?

We're told the tunnel will link Battery Park City with Ground Zero and the rest of Downtown. Where's the demand for *that*? Battery Park City's apartments are full, and the World Financial Center's commercial space, half-vacated after 9/11, is fast being re-absorbed.

So why is the tunnel scheme on the table? One interpretation is that certain powerful interests see windfall profits — a boondoggle that will batten on labor payoffs, concrete-cost overruns and pork-barrel procurement.

Beware public-private influence-peddling of the sort epitomized by Alfonse D'Amato's infamous \$500,000 phone call to expedite an MTA contract.

We may yet be spared. The state is also considering an option simply to retain and spruce up the West Street surface road for a mere \$175 million. It isn't too late for Pataki to do the right thing and save us from a tunnel with no light at either end.

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