



ACTION -- AT LAST

By STEVE CUOZZO

GOV. Pataki's decision to drop plans for a near-\$1 billion West Street tunnel is good news for Lower Manhattan — but it is catastrophically *late* good news.

Goldman Sachs finally got Pataki's attention last week when it backed off its intention to build a new headquarters in Battery Park City, largely because of fears that the tunnel's northern entrance ramps would be plunked on its doorstep. But nobody yet knows whether scrubbing the tunnel for a more rational and less expensive surface-road refurbishing will be enough to woo the Wall Street firm back.

Lest anyone forget, Goldman Sachs cited "growing uncertainty over what the whole neighborhood will look like" and "how the Freedom Tower will be positioned and how streets will be configured."

Maybe that qualm will motivate the governor to tackle Downtown's biggest crisis — the near-breakdown of progress at Ground Zero.

As described on these pages last week, all the site's major elements — the Freedom Tower, memorial, PATH terminal, etc. — are bogged down by turf battles and disputes over financing and/or aesthetics.

The latest project revealed as stuck in the mud is the \$400 million, Frank Gehry-designed performing arts building, which turns out to lack funding.

Pataki unfathomably set everything back with the tunnel folly, which would have impacted everything around it and added another imponderable to a development process already short on clarity and order.

It would have turned West Street, which runs by the site, into an impassable nightmare for years on end — on top of the area's myriad other excavations, street repavings and demolition projects.

A tunnel would have severed Battery Park City from the rest of Manhattan for a decade and forced traffic onto already snarled streets nearby.

And to what end? To theoretically help preserve the "sanctity" of the 9/11 memorial and provide greater security for the Freedom Tower.

Both arguments were bogus. The memorial will still have traffic whizzing by on Liberty Street and on newly-extended Greenwich and Fulton streets. As for protecting the Freedom Tower, why stop at guarding against truck bombs? Why not surround it with anti-aircraft batteries, too?

Yet progress is so slow on everything else, the tunnel might have been finished before the memorial or Freedom Tower is even *started*.

Nothing could budge Pataki off the tunnel scheme — not protests from Community Board I and virtually the entire resident population of Battery Park City; not the realization that the northern entrance portal, if moved to placate Goldman Sachs, might end up in front of new apartment buildings and schoolyards.

On Jan. 28, I wrote that the "worse than pointless" tunnel "guarantees years of traffic and transit paralysis" and "a carnival of cost overruns" — even while Ground Zero stagnates and both Fiterman Hall and the old Deutsche Bank building seem destined to remain shrouded, burned-out hulks indefinitely.

Goldman Sachs, which had long expressed misgivings about the tunnel, provided necessary shock therapy last week.

How could the state blow the opportunity for a major new skyscraper right next to the WTC site, one that would ensure the continued presence Downtown of 10,000 workers, including many of the country's highest-paid executives?

Maybe it's not too late to persuade Goldman to build. In any event, Pataki needs to bring order — immediately — to the chaotic Ground Zero scene.

There is a raging battle between the Port Authority and the Lower Manhattan Development Corp. over which will pay for infrastructure on the entire site. (Because Ground Zero crams in so many elements, virtually nothing can be built until *all* the infrastructure issues are settled.)

There are bitter disputes between leaseholder Larry Silverstein and the Port Authority over the Freedom Tower's underground infrastructure and continuing confusion over what the tower's top will look like and who will pay for it.

The Silverstein-PA scrimmage suggests a dangerous stalemate that might result in nothing rising for a long time. In a worst-case scenario, the PA's ponderous bureaucracy would be blamed for impeding Silverstein's progress; others would say Silverstein, more nervous than he admits about lack of tenants, wanted an excuse to stall.

It's up to Pataki, who controls the two agencies and has considerable leverage over Silverstein, to force the issues.

Until he does, Silverstein will have trouble finding tenants for 7 World Trade Center, much less for the Freedom Tower.

And until he does, Downtown — for all the strides it has made since 9/11 — will remain a spooky landscape of broken promises, dominated by a 16-acre empty pit.

E-mail: scuozzo@nypost.com

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