

<b>POST OPINION</b>
Editorials
Columnists
Letters
<b>NYPOST.COM</b>
Home
Archives
Last 7 Days
Breaking News
Business
Career Center
Cartoons
Classified
Columnists
Coupons
Entertainment
Gossip
Home Delivery
Horoscope
Learning Center
Lifestyle
Lottery
News
NYC Rental Listings
PageSix.com
Parenting
Post Opinion
Post Store
Puzzles
Real Estate
Reviews
Shopping
Sports
Story Index
Traffic
Travel
TV Listings
Weather
<b>SEARCH</b>
Contact Us
Job Openings
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# POST opinion columnists

## POST PROMOTIONS

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Heath Feels Heat From Puffy

## TRANSIT UTOPIANS

By STEVE CUOZZO

October 17, 2002 --

THERE seems no end to fanciful proposals to fix all of Downtown's presumed transit ills. Last Friday, this newspaper reported a new howler: an "AirTrain" to link Lower Manhattan with JFK Airport with a one-seat ride.

Never mind that nobody knows whether it would cost \$4 billion or \$8 billion. Never mind that such a train would enjoy a ridership between few and none.

Or: Tunnelize West Street - a cataclysmic, multi-billion upheaval for the vague purpose of "integrating" Battery Park City into the rest of the area. Never mind that nobody has a clue what to put on top of the tunnel. At this rate, we can expect a dome over Downtown with monorails suspended from the roof.

Far-fetched projects like the AirTrain have little likelihood of being built. But where do they come from?

The terrorist attack opened the door to a warped, but widely accepted, vision of Downtown: that it was mortally flawed prior to the attack. The fact that it was thriving as of Sept. 10, 2001 is swept aside.

The predictable short-term loss of jobs and a few large financial firms after 9/11 caused planners to lose faith in Downtown's natural recuperative powers. They argued that to save Lower Manhattan, it was necessary to "get it right" at last. For many, that meant promoting minor transit *inconveniences* into a supposed major obstacle to Downtown's future.

Transit utopians like to frame the debate as choosing among worthy options - like weighing the benefits of one-ride commuter access to Downtown versus a new "Grand Central" transit hub there. But what if Downtown doesn't need *any* of these cataclysmic remedies?

LAST month, a coalition of the Alliance for Downtown, the Association for a Better New York, the New York City Partnership and the Real Estate Board of N.Y. declared its "Key Principles in Rebuilding Lower Manhattan."

It made the "highest priority" to integrate downtown's subway and PATH connections "into the region's broader transportation network" and urged "full funding" to "create direct and speedy rail access to downtown for LIRR riders and AirTrain passengers from Jamaica."

The coalition also wants "a major transportation hub . . . in the heart of Lower Manhattan that links the subway system, PATH and, ultimately, commuter and airport rail lines."

The proposals have teeth since the federal government green-lighted the use of \$4.55 billion in funds for transit schemes downtown - part of the \$21 billion pledged to help New York recover from Sept. 11, and a drop in the bucket compared to the \$7.48 billion in transit projects on agencies' wish-lists. (They will be discussed at a forum titled "The \$4,500,000,000 Question" today at the Steven L. Newman Real Estate Institute of Baruch College.)

SOME prominent downtown advocates, like Carl Weisbrod and Bill Rudin (the presidents of the Downtown Alliance and the Association for a Better New York), sincerely believe transit overhaul is essential to Lower Manhattan's future.

But certain others quietly root for costly, complex transit projects to delay office reconstruction at Ground Zero. That's because every square foot of lost office space that is *not* replaced makes every existing square foot of Manhattan office space more valuable.

Like the buildings owned by Boston Properties. Its chairman, Mort Zuckerman, is also the chairman of the Daily News. Not surprisingly, the Daily News on Tuesday editorialized for extending commuter lines downtown as a "first" priority.

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