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Heeding Outcry, State Drops Plan for Tunnel at Ground Zero

By [DAVID W. DUNLAP](#)

A longstanding but controversial plan to rebuild West Street-Route 9A as a tunnel alongside the World Trade Center memorial and Freedom Tower sites has been given up by New York State officials.

Taking into account many objections - including protests by Verizon and Goldman, Sachs & Company, which planned to build a new headquarters on West Street - the state's Department of Transportation will recommend rebuilding the highway as an eight-lane boulevard at the same grade as surrounding streets.

It is too early to say whether the abandonment of the tunnel will affect Goldman's decision, disclosed nine days ago, to suspend negotiations on the West Street parcel and look for a site elsewhere in Manhattan. A company spokesman declined to comment yesterday.

But by embracing a surface boulevard, state officials may have broken one of the bigger logjams in the reconstruction of the trade center site. The at-grade plan will cost about \$700 million less than a tunnel, will take less time to build and will cause less disruption of utility lines and other nearby building projects, like Freedom Tower.

Gov. George E. Pataki "believes that this recommendation is the result of an inclusive process which reflects the input of the community and other Lower Manhattan stakeholders," a spokeswoman, Lynn Rasic, said yesterday. "This is the solution that best addresses the needs and concerns that have been raised."

She added that Mr. Pataki hoped some of the federal transit money that would have gone into the tunnel could be applied to a direct rail link between Long Island and Lower Manhattan.

Mr. Pataki endorsed the West Street tunnel two years ago, saying it would "divert loud, fast-moving highway traffic underground to protect the dignity of the memorial, while also providing an elegant welcome at the front door of the World Financial Center."

Another argument in favor of a tunnel was that it might serve as a deterrent to car and truck bombs.

Despite the governor's endorsement, the transportation department had never formally recommended a tunnel. Instead, under the environmental review process, the agency was studying alternatives for rebuilding West Street-Route 9A between Vesey Street and West Thames Street in Battery Park City, just south of Rector Street.

"Based on the cost difference, the construction impacts to the community, the impacts to utilities and the length of construction, the at-grade alternative fits the goals we outlined in the environmental impact statement," said Timothy J. Gilchrist, the agency's director for downstate transportation strategy.

Mr. Gilchrist said the state would notify the Federal Highway Administration of its decision in a few weeks. Should federal officials accept the recommendation, he said, design could begin in early summer and take about 18 months. Construction would cost about \$225 million, depending on the number of pedestrian bridges and the amount of landscaping and other amenities. It would take about two years to complete.

"Everyone has been waiting for this decision," said William C. Rudin, chairman of the Association for a Better New York. He said the recommendation would "solve a lot of pieces of the puzzle."

Kevin M. Rampe, the president of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, said that the decision on West Street "allows us to move forward" on many fronts.

Like the governor, Mr. Rampe had earlier described the tunnel as the best buffer between highway traffic and a solemn memorial, but yesterday he said that transportation officials had been "very good about ensuring that whatever would be done would be respectful of the memorial and the site."