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Downtown, a Debate Over Burying West Street

By EDWARD WYATT

Almost from the beginning of the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan, one point of near-universal agreement has been that Battery Park City is isolated from the rest of downtown. To rejoin it to the rest of the city, planners have proposed that West Street be buried and covered with a tree-lined promenade.

Advertisement But now, as with any major development project in New York City, local opposition has begun to build. Though few so far, a growing number of Battery Park City residents have begun to lobby against a West Street tunnel, saying they fear that a decade-long construction project will further isolate their neighborhood, rather than reconnect it to the rest of Lower Manhattan.

The nascent Coalition to Save West Street has raised a discomfiting specter for rebuilding officials: a fight over what could be a centerpiece of the redevelopment of long-blighted areas south of the World Trade Center site.

"I can't see any way that this would not make it harder to live in Battery Park City," said Joanne Taylor, a resident and one of the organizers of the coalition. "In 1993, after the first bombing of the World Trade Center, West Street was closed and it took forever to get anywhere from down here. This past year, West Street was closed from September to April, and it was a nightmare for us. Now they want us to endure 10 years of construction where we will not be able to drive by car or taxi out of Battery Park City to the rest of the city."

Many rebuilding officials, including some at the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and at some of the architecture and urban planning firms hired to work on the proposal, say they have not heard much opposition to the West Street tunnel. They point out that more than 70 percent of the participants at two town hall meetings at the Javits Convention Center this summer agreed that it was "very important" to eliminate West Street as a barrier between Battery Park City and the rest of Manhattan.

Those officials who have heard opposition have urged the disgruntled to wait until they see detailed plans, to be presented later this year, before deciding what elements of the tunnel proposals they dislike.

"There has been a heavy majority of people in Lower Manhattan and Battery Park City who believe that West Street is a barrier and it does cut them off," said Andrew Winters, director of design and development at the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the agency that is overseeing the rebuilding effort.

The opponents, however, believe that to wait for plans is to lose the fight, one that they believe exists mainly because the people overseeing planning for Lower Manhattan do not live there and do not understand the true nature of the area. They say they fear that a buried West Street and surface promenade would not allow adequate access for emergency vehicles to get into southern Battery Park City.

They also express concern that it would restrict residents' ability to easily enter the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, and to reach the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive via the Battery Park underpass.

Planners who have worked on West Street proposals say the promenade figures in a broader redesign of downtown, one that will increase housing in the area south of Liberty Street between Broadway and West Street. Building a grand promenade would encourage the conversion of lackluster office space in that area to apartments, and could bring the focus of both sides of West Street back toward each other. Currently, they say, most of the buildings in Battery Park City turn their backs on West Street.

Four options are being considered in the redesign of West Street. One option includes no tunnel; rather, it would have more pedestrian bridges over the street than the two that currently exist.

Bill Love, a Battery Park City resident who has spoken out against the tunnel plans at several public meetings, said he believed that "pedestrian bridges are all that's necessary."

Two pedestrian bridges were in place before Sept. 11; one, linking the World Financial Center to the trade center and its subways, was destroyed in the collapse of the twin towers. But a new overpass has been built at Rector Street, and some plans under consideration envision five or more elevated crossings.

Other Battery Park City residents argue that West Street itself is not so formidable a barrier. "The thousands of tourists who throng to our neighborhood every weekend don't have any problem crossing over it," said John Dellaportas, who put together the coalition's Web site, www.saveweststreet.com.

Two of the other West Street proposals would cover the street only in the area immediately adjacent to the trade center site, in the four blocks from Vesey Street to Liberty Street. One of these plans would build a platform over the roadway, and the other would dig a tunnel to move traffic underground.

Those plans are not wholly objectionable to some of the 10 coalition members who gathered on a recent evening on the World Financial Center plaza to plot strategy. Still, they say, they fear that even such a short tunnel would worsen traffic from visitors to the trade center site, particularly those who come in buses.

It is the fourth option — a tunnel from Vesey Street to Battery Park — that has drawn the most resistance. In part, the objections are short-term, focused on how long it would take to dig and build the tunnel.

People on both sides make a guess at 10 years and \$2 billion for such a project, a disheartening estimate given that the State Transportation Department just finished a multiyear renovation of the street, extending northward to 59th Street. The only way to pay for such a project, some residents say, is to allow for commercial construction above the tunnel.

Madelyn Wils, the chairwoman of Community Board 1, which includes the area, and a member of the development corporation's board, said she could understand the complaints of those who fear such a construction project. "A project that takes 10 years is not going to be looked upon with great admiration," she said. "I feel less empathy for those who just feel they don't want to be connected to the rest of the neighborhoods."

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