

The New York Times

New York Region

November 20, 2003

For a Construction Project Underneath West Street, the Long Line of Opposition Forms Here

By MICHAEL LUO

Grass-roots campaigns are usually won when people speak loudly and often -- emphasis on often -- and that is what opponents to the West Street tunnel did yesterday.

More than a dozen people lined up at the microphone during a public information meeting to denounce the proposal, supported by Gov. George E. Pataki, to spend \$860 million to bury a half-mile section of the road alongside the planned World Trade Center memorial site.

Most of the comments were familiar: the tunnel plan was too expensive; construction would disrupt traffic for too long; the money would be better spent elsewhere; the tunnel ramps would be dangerous to pedestrians.

People in the line said their goal yesterday was to underscore their opposition.

In his statement, William Love, vice chairman of the Coalition to Save West Street, a group of more than 350 residents, transportation advocates and environmentalists, said the plans "should discourage additional through traffic on West Street and also encourage most downtown visitors to utilize public transportation, especially given the world-class transit center that will be built."

The tunnel proposal has been generating controversy since it was suggested last year, although many residents agreed at redevelopment meetings that something needed to be done about West Street's isolation of Battery Park City from the rest of Manhattan.

A more ambitious and expensive proposal, to run a tunnel from Chambers Street to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, was scrapped. Instead, in June, state officials released two alternatives, a "no-build alternative" which would actually involve expanding the current six-lane temporary road that was opened in March 2002 to eight lanes, and the tunnel option, called the "short bypass alternative." Yesterday, a third option was added, a true "no-build" plan which would leave the existing six-lane highway.

The tunnel plan would restore the eight lanes of traffic that existed before the Sept. 11 terror attack, but four lanes of through traffic would go underground, starting at Murray Street to the north and ending somewhere between Liberty and Albany Streets to the south. Four lanes of local traffic would run above ground.

The proposal to expand the highway without a tunnel would take one year to design, 18 months to build and cost \$175 million. In contrast, the tunnel would take two years to design and two-and-a-half to three years to build. But Mr. Pataki has expressed his support for it because it would shield the memorial site from traffic noise.

Tunnel opponents had also criticized state officials for giving no notice by mail about the last meeting. This time, officials sent out brochures and used microphones to give the information session the feel of a public hearing.

"If it's not perceived to be an open and honest process," said Richard J. Schmalz, the project director, "then people aren't going to buy it."

Still, some opponents questioned whether they could have any effect on the decision, given the governor's preference.

"A big question I have is who is making this decision," said Helene Seeman, a Battery Park City resident.

At least one resident, Hilary Kitasei, did speak in favor of the tunnel, arguing that the long-term benefit of beautifying the roadway far exceeds the temporary inconvenience.

"Spend the money," she said before her three minutes at the microphone. "It's only money."