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BLOCKS

## Long Tunnel, Short Tunnel, No Tunnel? State on Spot

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

**T**O understand why the fate of the West Street-Route 9A tunnel in Lower Manhattan remains unsettled 20 months after Gov. George E. Pataki publicly embraced it, you should stand on Park Avenue at either 33rd Street or 40th Street.

What you will see are the mouths of the Park Avenue tunnel, which sluices two lanes of traffic to and from the viaduct around Grand Central Terminal. The ramps at both ends create ceaseless, impassable incisions in the streetscape. "A pedestrian was killed crossing here," says a traffic sign at the north end. "Be alert. Cross with care."

Standing at these intersections, it is not hard to figure out why Goldman, Sachs & Company would not want anything resembling such a portal - actually, a portal three times wider - outside the main entrance of the headquarters it is planning at West and Vesey Streets in Battery Park City. Goldman's unhappiness has prompted state officials to rethink the north end of the tunnel plan.

The basic idea is to depress West Street, which is also a leg of Route 9A, and create an underpass for through traffic, with two lanes and a shoulder in either direction. On the deck above the underpass would be a four-lane roadway for local traffic, divided by a landscaped median. This is meant to bridge the 260-foot-wide right of way that divides the World Financial Center at Battery Park City from the rest of downtown.

West Street will become "a distinguished stretch rather than a barren divide," Governor Pataki promised in April 2003. "Adjacent to the World Trade Center site, a new short tunnel from Vesey Street to Liberty Street will 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."

Plenty of people, many of them residents of Battery Park City, disagreed with this assessment. Opponents envision years of disruption on top of what they have already endured. They say that the tunnel ramps would create almost as long an obstruction as the deck would cure. And they question the need to spend \$860 million on such a project when there are so many other transportation needs.

THE portals are of particular concern because of the potential noise, fumes and mixing bowl of traffic. With a tunnel mouth at Vesey Street, northbound through traffic on its way to Battery Park City would have to drive through a residential neighborhood, since the first left-hand turnoff would be at Warren Street.

A draft environmental impact statement on the Route 9A reconstruction looked at three possibilities: a \$175 million, eight-lane surface roadway; a tunnel from Liberty to Vesey Street; and a slightly longer tunnel with a southern portal at Cedar Street.

Now, in the wake of Goldman's objections and other responses to the draft impact statement, state transportation officials are studying the possibility of moving the north portal two blocks uptown, to Murray Street, or one block uptown, to Barclay Street, with a landscaped roof deck over the portal mouth.

Asked whether the alternatives now being explored would affect the environmental review, Tim Gilchrist, the director of policy and strategy at the New York State Transportation Department, said, "We are continuing to work within the framework of the current environmental impact statement."

Decisions must be made soon, since Goldman Sachs appears all but ready to begin construction of its building, which has been designed by Pei Cobb Freed & Partners to have an expansive presence along West Street, including the main entrance.

While open to finding "creative solutions" to the problems posed by the tunnel design, the governor remains committed to "ensuring that the sanctity of the memorial is preserved," said a spokeswoman, Lynn Rasic. In other words, he still favors a tunnel.

The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation also sees the tunnel - officially known as the short bypass - as a way of sparing the memorial from being next to an eight-lane surface highway, said its president, Kevin M. Rampe.

Would a tunnel with a Vesey Street portal be a deal breaker for Goldman? Would a Murray Street portal solve many of the company's problems? Besides saying that the governor "has been extremely responsive to our concerns," a spokesman for Goldman Sachs, Peter Rose, said he had no further comment.

At the northeast corner of West and Vesey Streets, Verizon has a switching center, 140 West Street, with several hundred conduits and cable and fiber optic lines that would have to be relocated for a tunnel, the impact statement said. A spokesman for Verizon, Daniel Diaz Zapata, would not say how the company feels about the tunnel but said it "will work with the construction command center to address all concerns."

At the southwest corner, American Express has its headquarters in 3 World Financial Center. The center is largely owned by Brookfield Properties. At the southeast corner, Silverstein Properties is planning to build the Freedom Tower. None of these companies would offer a comment on the tunnel or the portals.

It is a fairly reliable rule of thumb that when executives have nothing to say publicly about a project in which they have a large stake, big things may be happening behind the scenes. If that rule applies at West and Vesey Streets, something is up.

Perhaps as far up as Murray Street.