

Group Mounts Campaign Against Burying West St.

By Ronald Drenger

A group of Battery Park City residents has launched a campaign to oppose the proposal to bury West Street as part of the World Trade Center site's redevelopment—an idea the residents fear has already gained support among planning officials.

The month-old group, calling itself the "Coalition to Save West Street," says that burying West Street would entail 10 years of construction and would disrupt life in Battery Park City, cost too much money and make it harder for residents to drive to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel and the Battery Park underpass that leads to the FDR Drive.

At its second organizational meeting, on Oct. 8, about 20 residents laid out a plan to distribute flyers and position papers, meet with public officials and pitch its argument to the media. Over the next few weeks, the coalition, which claimed about 100 members as of early October and said it was growing fast, will try to convince elected officials, planners, Downtown residents, and civic organizations with a voice in the redevelopment process that burying West Street is a bad idea.

"What we need to do is advise the powers that be that it will have serious negative consequences on the community around it, during construction and when it's complete," said John Dellaportas, a Battery Park City resident and one of the group's organizers. "We hope to get commitments soon from elected officials and community groups to support a more reasonable approach. We don't have a lot of time."

The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), the city-state agency that is overseeing the rebuilding process Downtown, provided its six teams of architects and planners with a detailed set of requirements on Oct. 11. The teams are supposed to submit development proposals by the end of November and the LMDC hopes to narrow the options down to three plans, culled from the six proposals, by year's end.

Among the new planning requirements that the LMDC gave to the designers was the creation of a "grand promenade on West Street." Members of the Coalition to Save West Street fear such a promenade will require burying all or part of West Street below Chambers Street.

The proposal to bury part of the roadway to create a promenade was suggested in one of six preliminary development plans released by the LMDC in July. Those plans were roundly criticized for concentrating too much commercial space on the building site, and have essentially been set aside, but the idea of developing the area that is now West Street has gained prominence.

Supporters of the plan say it would connect Battery Park City to the rest of Lower Manhattan and provide more space adjacent to the trade center site for building construction or for the pedestrian promenade. Rebuilding officials have pointed out that 70 percent of participants at two "Listening to the City" forums in July said it was "somewhat important" or "very important" to eliminate West Street as a barrier between Battery Park City and the rest of Lower Manhattan.

But Dellaportas said the results were skewed by the way the questions were posed. "They never asked, 'Do you believe West Street should be buried?' Or, 'Do you think the LMDC should spend two billion dollars over 12 years to bury West Street? I think you would have gotten different answers."

He and other local opponents of burying West Street charge that planning officials are ignoring them.

"We would like the LMDC to acknowledge that there's a community here that will be affected by the plans," said Dellaportas. "The LMDC and the design teams should have community input before they come out with the new designs, not after. We believe the members of our community have the best sense of what's needed for this neighborhood, but the LMDC has completely ignored the interests of this community."

The coalition plans to develop its own proposal to create what Dellaportas described as "a more pedestrian-friendly West Street, a tree-line boulevard, but something short of a tourist promenade."

"It does not have to be a choice between the status quo and burying West Street," Dellaportas said. "We'd like to suggest that there are ways to make West Street as pedestrian-friendly as a tunnel would do, but in one year, not 12 years."

Nancy Poderycki, a spokeswoman for the LMDC, said the agency was still exploring a wide range of possibilities for the Trade Center site and surrounding areas, including West Street. And she said that creating a promenade along West Street would not necessarily require that a portion of the roadway be buried.

"It could entail tunneling, partial tunneling, elevated pedestrian decks, or pedestrian bridges," she said. "We have to see how the dialogue moves forward, and what the designers come up with."

"We are aware there are a variety of opinions regarding the options for West Street," Poderycki added. "We've received many comments from the public, some were all for a long promenade, others were not so keen on the idea. So I wouldn't say there's a consensus about burying West Street."

Poderycki said the public would have ample opportunity to comment on all aspects of the designs for the trade center site and beyond.

"We are now in phase two of the planning process," she said. "We had a public input period preceding this phase, and we will have public input after this phase. An advisory council to the LMDC, made up of Downtown residents, also has opportunities to provide input, she said.

In the meantime, opponents of burying West Street are cultivating alliances. Community Board 1 has not weighed in one way or another. In its redevelopment recommendations included in a Sept. 17 resolution, the board called for "a redesigned West Street that improves the connection between Battery Park City and the rest of Lower Manhattan," adding simply that any proposed changes "should be evaluated carefully in terms of cost, potential benefits, and disruption to adjacent communities, particularly Battery Park City."

But in an Op-Ed article in the New York Times on Oct. 5, Gene Russianoff, a lawyer for the New York Public Interest Research Group's Straphangers Campaign, an advocacy organization for subway riders, wrote that submerging West Street would be "a colossal mistake." The Automobile Club of New York, an affiliate of the American Automobile Association, also opposes West Street's burial.

"Probably in the next few weeks we will have contacted every appropriate elected official and public interest group," Dellaportas said.