

Residents Campaign Against Burying West Street

By Ronald Drenger

Going around the table last month in a Battery Park City community room, a group of activists is introducing themselves. With each person's comments, more gloom filled the air.

"We're going to be trapped like rats," said Kathleen Bachand, a Battery Park City resident.

"It's going to be a cold, deserted dangerous place," said Joanne Chernow, also of Battery Park City.

"There's some very careful propaganda going around and we have to find a way to counter it," said a man who did not want his name used.

The Coalition to Save West Street, a band of Downtown residents that claims hundreds of supporters, sees a dark future in proposals to bury part or all of West Street between Chambers Street and the Battery as part of the World Trade Center site's redevelopment. And they fear that the tunnel suggestion has already won support among Downtown planning officials.

Hoping to build a political ground swell, the group has launched a campaign to convince anyone who will listen that burying West Street is a bad idea.

"We hope to win support for a more reasonable approach," said John Dellaportas, a Battery Park City resident and litigation lawyer who leads the effort. "We don't have a lot of time."

The group makes up for its small core in persistence.

When Brookfield Properties presented its vision for a buried West Street to a Community Board 1 committee early last month (see adjacent story), Coalition members were there to speak against it.

A couple of weeks later, they pitched their views to Frederick Schwartz, a member of one of six teams hired by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation to work on plans for the Trade Center site and surrounding areas, and they've been promised an audience with a second team.

Volunteers have been petitioning and leafleting at Battery Park City buildings and through the P.S. 89 PTA, which got their literature into children's backpacks.

Visitors to the group's website, saveweststreet.com, are zapping emails to 11 elected officials and a dozen media outlets with one click.

The coalition says that construction of a West Street tunnel would disrupt life in Battery Park City for 10 years, cause traffic jams, create security problems and impede vehicle access into and out of the neighborhood.

But supporters of the proposal say it would remove West Street as a barrier between Battery Park City and the rest of Lower Manhattan and would provide more space adjacent to the trade center site for building construction or public open space.

When the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the city-state agency that is overseeing the rebuilding process Downtown, provided its six design teams with a detailed set of requirements on Oct. 11, the guidelines included the creation of a "grand promenade on West Street."

The coalition fears such a promenade will require burying the roadway.

But Nancy Poderycki, an LMDC spokeswoman, 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 would not necessarily require burying part of the highway.

"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 is a variety of opinions regarding the options for West Street," Poderycki added. "I wouldn't say there's a consensus about burying West Street."

The design teams are supposed to submit their proposals by the end of this month and the LMDC hopes to winnow those down to three by year's end. Dellaportas and other opponents of burying West Street charge that the planning agency is ignoring them.

"We would like the LMDC to acknowledge that there's a community that will be affected by the plans," said Dellaportas. "They should have community input before they come out with new designs, not after. Members of our community have the best sense of what's needed for this neighborhood."

Poderycki said the public will continue to have ample opportunity to comment on all aspects of the designs for the Trade Center site and beyond.

The coalition says it will develop its own proposal to toss into the planning mix, for a tree-lined, pedestrian-friendly boulevard that Dellaportas said would take about a year to construct. "It does not have to be a choice between the status quo and burying West Street," he said.

In the meantime, the coalition is cultivating alliances.

Representatives of the New York Public Interest Research Group's Straphangers Campaign, an advocacy group for subway riders, and the Automobile Club of New York, an affiliate of the American Automobile Association, have declared their opposition to West Street's burial.

But Community Board 1 has not yet weighed in and others are reserving judgment as well.

"I'm trying to stay relaxed on this," said Martha Gallo, president of the Battery Park City Parents Association, "until the facts become clear."

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