Moving Around Downtown

by Iris Weinshall
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The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation's blueprint for rebuilding lower Manhattan strongly emphasizes transportation. In fact, the corporation says that construction on much of the World Trade Center site cannot begin until transportation improvements are in place.

While I applaud this emphasis, I am not surprised by it. The September 11th tragedy struck a massive blow to the transportation and utility infrastructure of Lower Manhattan. The subway lines, the PATH, major roads and critical utility lines were all knocked out of service -- some for a few days or weeks, others for months and for years to come.

In light of this, one of the keys to the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan is not only what the site is ultimately going to look like, but how we get people in and out of the area. In addition, tragedy has left us with a tremendous opportunity -- a clean slate to work with. So another key issue is how we can use the rebuilding process to rectify a number of the planning mistakes that were in place before September 11.

For people who worked downtown, lived downtown, or even tried to go downtown before September 11, lower Manhattan was a hodgepodge of subway and commuter lines. Often you could not connect from one line to another line. There was no one link bringing everything together. Instead, you had to go through caverns of underground walkways and at times probably thought you would never reach the subway line you needed. Although a fairly active ferry service came into the Battery Park City north cove, there was no connection to bring the people to the buildings where they worked or to the subway lines. And the major commuter transportation line coming into lower Manhattan, the PATH, also did not connect to all the subway lines.

To correct this, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation has called for a new hub

connecting subway, commuter rail and ferry lines. This would probably mean the creation of an actual terminal in lower Manhattan.

In Europe, there are many grand terminals that are really testimonials and memorials to great times in European history and to great battles. Maybe the new downtown transportation terminal could be another memorial to the people who lost their lives on September 11.

The hub could be a beacon for lower Manhattan. It would serve as a station for the PATH train and for all the subway lines. At 42nd Street on the West Side, one subway station pretty much links you up with all the train lines. This downtown terminal would do the same thing. It would also connect to the ferry terminal and to various sites downtown. It could include an underground bus terminal for commuter buses and the tour buses that will come downtown to bring visitors to the proposed memorial and museum and other sites. My sense is that the proposed terminal will probably be somewhere along Church Street, but no exact location has been determined yet.

After September 11, we analyzed how people come into lower Manhattan, where are they come from and where they want to go. We found that more than 40 percent of the people who took the PATH train went east to the Wall Street area after they came in, some to buildings, some to subway lines. But there was no way of getting them east below ground. They walked above ground.

This suggests the need to create a link to get people farther east and into our subway system quickly and safely. This could involve an underground pedestrian tunnel and people movers.

Extension of the commuter rail lines into this downtown hub is also being discussed. We now have an ideal opportunity to do this and ease the commute downtown for thousands of Westchester and Long Island residents, but it would be quite costly. Whether or not this should be pursued as opposed to other initiatives remains to be seen.

Many of the other links are already in place. Clearly the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the Port Authority were stretched to the limit before September 11. Now, though, President Bush's recovery bill of $21 billion includes nearly $2 billion for this initiative, as well as funding for road and infrastructure repair. However, meeting the transportation needs of lower

Manhattan has been estimated to cost at least $7 billion.

Some aspects of the plan will eventually save money. Before September 11, the bus routes downtown, as well as truck deliveries, were very cumbersome because of the streetscape. If you remember, Dey Street and Fulton Street did not go through to the river because of the World Trade Center site. Restoring the street grid will make it easier and more economical for trucks and buses to move downtown.

Restoring the street grid will also make the streets more accessible and safer for pedestrians, which is one of my big goals. It will connect lower Manhattan in a more rational way to Battery Park City. As we restore the grid, we can create a number of access points to the street to help passengers safely go to and from the various subway stations, tunnels and people movers.

Burying West Street for all or part of the way between Chambers Street and the Battery Park Underpass, as the development corporation's plan suggests, would make it easier for pedestrians to go from the World Trade Center site to Battery Park City, the World Financial Center and the waterfront. In addition, it would create a swath of land above the new tunnel that could be used as a greenspace or for other purposes.

After September 11, although the PATH was out of service, New York City was able to get back in operation very quickly because of our waterways and our ability to offer ferry service to people coming to Lower Manhattan from New Jersey and Brooklyn. Ferry ridership in New York has nearly doubled since September 11.

Ferry service is an incredibly dynamic and adaptable mass transit option and, perhaps, an underutilized one. Now that we have an abundance of ferry terminals, we should figure out ways to make ferry service competitive even after the PATH comes back. If you price ferry service sensibly, I think you will get a lot of converts to commuting by water

In the months since September 11, we have taken steps to help the area rebuild. Now I am hopeful that six years after the tragedy, we will have created an accessible, revitalized and vibrant Lower Manhattan.

Iris Weinshall is New York City commissioner of transportation.

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