

## Coalition to Save West Street: Downtown Can Be Great Again, Without All the Digging

by John Dellaportas

Thursday, February 19, 2004 04:58 PM

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Some may now find it hard to believe, but prior to 9/11, downtown Manhattan was a pretty fantastic place to live and work. For the past eight years, my wife and I have made our home in Battery Park City. Until last year, we both worked downtown as well. Downtown, with its own moods and rhythms, was a world away from the hustle and bustle going on uptown. In the immediate weeks after the tragedy, with the ruins still smoldering in the background, hundreds of thousands of us returned here, determined to rebuild our lives and our homes. After a year of hardship, we are starting to see through to the clear. But the much-touted plan to create a West Street tunnel threatens our neighborhood and just doesn't make sense.

### HOW THINGS STARTED TO GO AWRY

Planners and critics -- notably New York Times' architectural writer Herbert Muschamp -- view rebuilding lower Manhattan as an opportunity to place their stamp on the area. They claim there is something fundamentally wrong with downtown, and that the answer is not merely to rebuild what was lost but, in Mr. Muschamp's words, to "reimagine" how it all should be. A new generation of would-be Robert Moseses, including Lower Manhattan Development Corporation officials, have answered this call.

The development corporation's target: West Street. Its goal: to spend \$2-3 billion to bury the one-mile stretch of West Street from Chambers to Battery Park, in order to build a vehicle underground expressway and a tourist promenade on top. Its rationale: to spare downtown pedestrians the peril of crossing what has been termed a "dangerous highway." Never mind that West Street is neither wider nor more difficult to traverse than Houston Street or Park Avenue. And never mind that, prior to 9/11, the state had just completed a 5-year, \$400 million renovation of that same road. The West Street plan, per the Times, enjoyed "near-universal agreement."

### OUR COALITION

A month ago, five of us -- neighbors, yet strangers -- met on the Rector Green in Battery Park City in hopes of being heard over the din. We formed the Coalition to Save West Street, a community organization devoted to the idea that West Street and Lower Manhattan are largely OK. We started a petition drive, spoke at community events, launched a [web site](#), and leafleted the neighborhood. Today, we number over 200.

So who are we, and why are we so up in arms? We are the people who use West Street every day. We walk across it, we drive on it, we live and work along side of it. In short, we are the people the development corporation never bothered to ask before deciding on this scheme. As

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our membership has grown broader and more diverse, the Coalition to Save West has become a true "coalition." Here is a sampling of the people involved:

### **TRANSPORTATION ADVOCATES**

The notion of spending \$2 billion to \$3 billion to bury a functioning road is so outrageous, it has brought together two advocacy groups usually on the opposite sides of the debate: the American Automobile Association of New York, the voice of automobile drivers, and the Straphangers Campaign, the voice of subway riders. Both have come out in opposition to the tunnel. They understand that billions of dollars do not materialize out of thin air; they come from finite federal transit funds better spent on projects to repair roads and bridges, extend subway lines, and keep buses running.

### **PARENTS, STUDENTS AND TEACHERS**

The State Department of Transportation is privately estimating that the tunnel will take 11 to 12 years to complete. The students of PS 89 and IS 89, two of the schools on the edge of West Street, will have to cross the construction site twice a day, every day until they graduate. They will have to study over the racket of a tunnel being dug just outside their windows. The Parent-Teacher Associations of these schools have now gotten involved. The development corporation will be hearing from them soon.

### **ENVIRONMENTALISTS**

The core of the tunnel concept is the construction of an underground expressway, which will significantly increase motor vehicle traffic in Lower Manhattan. According to the environmental advocacy group Clean Air Campaign, the carbon monoxide, diesel fumes and other pollutants generated by all those additional cars in the tunnel will have to be vented upward on to the streets of lower Manhattan. The development corporation's plans depict greenery on the site, but ignore the invisible toxins that will contaminate their new tourist promenade.

### **BATTERY PARK CITY RESIDENTS**

West Street is Battery Park City's lifeline to the rest of the city, due to the fact that there are no subways and the neighborhood is surrounded on the other three sides by the Hudson River. Once the project is complete, we will no longer have direct access to the rest of the city traveling north on the West Side Highway or South to the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel or FDR Drive. The ambulances and fire trucks that raced down these roads to our rescue on the morning of 9/11 will no longer be able to do so. Area residents, especially school children, the elderly, the disabled and others who rely on bus transportation, will be relegated to narrow local access roads clogged with tourist traffic just to get to and from our homes. And, after the 1993 truck bomb attack on the World Trade Center, no one wants to live over a highway tunnel

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anymore. The continued viability of Battery Park City as one of New York City's great residential neighborhoods will be placed in doubt.

For the past month, the Coalition to Save West Street has been seeking a meeting with the development corporation's board to discuss these concerns. So far, only silence. Before the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation sends in its bulldozers, it should hear us out. Downtown can be great again, without all the digging.

*John Dellaportas is chair of the Coalition to Save West Street, a community group of lower Manhattan residents, workers and others who oppose the proposed West Street tunnel.*