

Meeting Notes
April 21, 2004
Pace University Multi-purpose Room

The meeting was called to order at approximately 9:05 AM. Bob Yaro introduced Richard Schmalz and his colleague, Heather Sporn from the New York State Department of Transportation (NYS-DOT). Bob thanked the NYS-DOT representatives for attending the meeting, and for being particularly responsive to the Civic Alliance's invitations to share information on the project and engage in a public dialogue.

Richard Schmalz opened the presentation for NYS-DOT. His colleague, Tim Gilchrist, also of NYSDOT, joined him midway through. Mr. Schmalz began by explaining the emergency restoration of Route 9A/ West Street that NYS-DOT oversaw after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, including the restoration of a temporary six-lane roadway, and two pedestrian bridges, at Rector Street and Vesey Street. This temporary roadway has been sufficient to carry current traffic volumes, which dropped by one third after 9/11. The traffic has returned lately to about 80% of its pre-9/11 capacity. The purpose of the current Route 9A project is to prepare a road configuration that will service traffic volumes through 2020, including increased demand brought upon by the redevelopment of the World Trade Center and the Memorial. Therefore, the current roadway will need to be replaced because it is constructed with temporary asphalt, and because its temporary six lane configuration is probably insufficient to meet future demand.

NYS-DOT is currently leading two related projects for Route 9A. The first, referred to as the Southern Promenade, will improve pedestrian conditions and traffic operations by turning West Street into an urban boulevard. Sidewalks should be widened to reach 25 feet. Significant trees and plantings will be added. The project encompasses the stretch of West Street from West Thames Street to Battery Place, and incorporates "intelligent transportation elements." This project will require a simple reevaluation of the 1994 Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS.) Because it retains the same number of lanes as before, it does not demand a new EIS. The estimated fully loaded cost for this project is \$120 million.

The second project encompasses the area of West Street adjacent to the World Trade Center site. This project will require a supplemental EIS to the 1994 FEIS. The three options are as follows:

1. **Short Bypass Option:** This plan would depress four lanes of traffic in a "short bypass" tunnel, from Murray to Albany Street, creating pedestrian crossings at Vesey and Liberty Street. The goal for this project would be to create a local street at grade, while ushering through traffic below grade to improve the quality of the pedestrian experience. This option is preferred by the Governor of New York. The fully-loaded project cost estimate for this option is \$860 million

2. At Grade Option: This option provides similar improvements to West Street as in the Promenade South plan. There will still be eight lanes of traffic, however sidewalks will be widened, trees and additional greenery will be planted, and paving stones of different materials will be used in crosswalks. The estimated fully loaded project cost for this option is \$175 million.
3. No-Action alternative: This option, the baseline against which other options are measured in the SEIS, would leave six lanes of traffic – the current temporary configuration of West Street. Temporary asphalt would need to be replaced and some traffic engineering would be required to accommodate long term increased use. Project cost estimates were not given.

The total project costs, including Promenade South and the option chosen for the area adjacent to the WTC site is estimated to run between \$295 to \$980 million, which includes 30-40% cost contingencies.

In addition to laying out these three options, the NYS-DOT representatives gave an overview of the environmental review schedule going forward.

Draft SEIS: May 2004

Public hearing: June 2004 (tentative date: June 24)

Final SEIS: September 2004

Record of Decision: November 2004

NYS-DOT also hopes to add an additional progress meeting before the late-June public hearing to allow for some additional public dialogue.

After the conclusion of their presentation, NYS-DOT representatives unrolled two large linear plan rendering of the short-bypass and at-grade options, and answered questions of Civic Alliance members while they looked at the plans. Some of questions raised by Civic Alliance members included:

- The process for the choosing one of the options and what is the impact of the Governor's stated preference for the Short Bypass option on the environmental review.
- Whether NYS-DOT had examined the impact of global climate change and rising sea levels on this project, and the different options.
- Whether NYS-DOT has considered increased air pollution brought about by automobiles mounting the grade change as they emerge from the tunnel in the short bypass solution.
- Width of sidewalk under both solutions.
- Whether the significant trees and plantings suggested are possible considering the limited subsurface soil – and how this challenge will be tackled.
- The length of proposed sub-surface tunnel, in addition to the preexisting approach to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, and the impact on pedestrians and drivers.
- Whether there are differences between grades between the two options *vis a vis* the grade at the World Trade Center site.

While some questions were addressed at the meeting, NYS-DOT referred to the impending Draft SEIS that will detail answer to some of the more technical questions. The question and discussion period concluded at approximately 10:00 AM.

Second on the agenda, the Civic Alliance heard a presentation from John Dellaportis, a lawyer and Battery Park City resident, and representative of the Save West Street Coalition, who was joined by Bill Love, also of the Save West Street Coalition. Mr. Dellaportis laid out a detailed response to the case for the short bypass option with an eight-point argument opposing this option.

1. A tunnel will isolate Battery Park City
2. A tunnel will endanger pedestrians.
3. A tunnel will create visual blight.
4. A tunnel will harm environment by drawing additional cars.
5. Lengthy construction will harm Downtown economy.
6. A tunnel will waste one billion dollars.
7. A tunnel will have only minimal benefit for exorbitant cost.
8. Cheaper, better alternatives exist

After John's presentation, Bill Love made a few remarks, noting in particular that no cost-benefit analysis has been performed for this project. Moreover, he noted that this project does not enjoy broad political support, as most local politicians oppose the project. The only major proponent of the short bypass option is the Governor himself. He also noted that a large group of transportation advocacy organizations oppose the short bypass option. John Dellaportis concluded by noting that even if the project cost nothing and required only a month of construction, they would still oppose it, as they found it without merit on every level.

After the presentation, there were some more questions and discussion from the Civic Alliance. Joan Byron asked whether the short bypass option might induce more "drive-by" viewing of the memorial, as it provides more traffic calming at the surface level, allowing drivers to slow down and perhaps stop when near the World Trade Center site.

David Kallick asked whether there are any additional proponents for the short-bypass option, in addition to the Governor.

Paul Elston disagreed with Save West Street's Coalition's assumption that the environmental community opposed the project. While the SWS Coalition named many transportation advocacy organizations opposed to the short bypass option, Paul ventured

that environmental groups may not opposed. He observed that while he personally was still on the fence, he generally supported projects that brought about more green space and a more inviting pedestrian environment. He observed that transportation advocates most likely opposed the project for cost reasons more than design issues.

Bob Yaro observed that the thinking of the Civic Alliance has evolved some since the beginning of the process. At “Listening to the City” in July 2002, one of the major recommendations of the public was to create a grand promenade from the World Trade Center site down to Battery Park and the harbor. However, as the project has evolved and cost estimates have become available, it is increasingly clear that costs for the short bypass tunnel may be prohibitive. He observed that the Civic Alliance may be leaning towards an endorsement of the at-grade solution, which would improve pedestrian and urban design conditions on West Street, at much less cost.

As a next step, the Civic Alliance agreed to draft a letter to Tim Gilchrist, restating some of the major concerns and questions from this meeting. This letter would be reviewed by the steering committee, circulated to the Civic Alliance voting members, and sent out in the next couple weeks. Gene Russianoff suggested that the Civic Alliance reach a position before the June public hearing, in order to give testimony at that time. Petra Todorovich agreed to summarize the meeting’s major points, and asked that any additional points and questions be emailed to her before the end of the month.

Announcements

Report available from March 16 “Beyond 16 Acres” meeting: How Can \$1.2 Billion Best Revitalize New York After 9/11?” sponsored by Fiscal Policy Institute and Regional Plan Association. For more information or copies of the report, contact David Dyssegaard Kallick at ddkallick@fiscalpolicy.org

The Civic Alliance will co-sponsor the CUNY Conference on The Future of a Sustainable Construction Industry in NYC Region: "From Practice to Theory" May 14 at the CUNY Graduate Center, 34th St and 5th Avenue, Manhattan. E-MAIL: continuinged@gc.cuny.edu

The meeting adjourned at approximately 11:00 AM.