



- [HOME](#)
- [BREAKING NEWS](#)
- [BUSINESS](#)
- [COLUMNISTS](#)
- [ENTERTAINMENT](#)
- [GOSSIP](#)
- [LIFESTYLE](#)
- [NEWS](#)**
- [Liberty Medals](#)
- [Regional News](#)
- [National News](#)
- [World News](#)
- [POST OPINION](#)
- [REAL ESTATE](#)
- [SPORTS](#)
- [STYLE](#)
- [TRAVEL](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Last 7 Days](#)
- [Story Index](#)
- [Cartoons](#)
- [Classified](#)
- [Coupons](#)
- [Games](#)
- [Home Delivery](#)
- [Horoscope](#)
- [Learning Center](#)
- [Lottery](#)
- [Post Store](#)
- [Post Winners](#)
- [Shopping](#)
- [Special Sections](#)
- [Traffic](#)
- [TV Listings](#)
- [Weather](#)

WTC MALL FIGHT

By **WILLIAM NEUMAN**



September 2, 2003 -- While planners try to put the finishing touches on a revised Ground Zero blueprint, sources said development officials continue to argue over where to put retail space at the site - with the city trying to block the return of a large underground shopping mall.

The retail dispute - which pits city planners against the Port Authority - is "the only debate left" before a new site plan is finalized, one official said.

The city is insisting that shops be located at street level or above, while the PA, which owns Ground Zero, is still seeking to recreate at least a portion of the underground mall that was in the original World Trade Center.

At issue is a four-block-long subterranean concourse running parallel to Church Street that, in the PA's plans, would connect to a new, state-of-the-art PATH station and be lined with big-name stores.

The PA favors the underground layout because it could bring higher rents - due to the large number of commuters that would walk by every day.

But city officials want the concourse eliminated or scaled back, fearing an underground mall will sap life from the streets.

Planners have already eliminated much of the spider-like sprawl of underground concourses shown in the site plan by architect Daniel Libeskind that was approved last February - and which is now being reworked.

The revised plan - which also includes a glass-covered "galleria" of shops at Cortlandt Street - will be revealed later this month.

The debate over how to lay out the shops comes as the company that owns the right to rebuild the retail area of the trade center is actively trying to find a way out of the project - talking to the PA and others about selling its interest at the WTC.

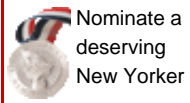
Westfield America has also talked to its WTC partner, Twin Towers leaseholder Larry Silverstein, who is eager to buy them out - except he doesn't have the money to do it.

Westfield has made no secret of its dislike for the Libeskind plan, and the company has also talked with developers Forest City Ratner and the Related Companies about taking over its role at the trade center, sources said.

Sources said that if the PA were to buy out Westfield, which signed the WTC lease just weeks before the 9/11 attack, the agency would later resell the retail rights.

Back to: [Regional News](#) | [National News](#) | [World News](#) | [Home](#)

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