

Last Chance for Battery Park City

For almost a decade the vacant landfill of Battery Park City in Lower Manhattan has produced nothing but grass. Those 91 acres along the Hudson River are still a prime resource for commercial, residential and recreational development. But what was once the promise of a "new town in town" is now just a fiscal morass.

The first payment on the Battery Park City Authority's \$200-million bond issue comes due next year. As things stand, the authority will have no funds to make the payment. Thus the dream is headed straight for default, or a costly bailout by the state treasury, unless something is done to generate income. The wisest course would be to risk some state money now on a more realistic plan than the last.

The project has never gone smoothly. New York City and State have disagreed over it for years. The lease between the city and the Battery Park City Authority has caused even worse trouble. Written to control the quality of what was built, it made building virtually impossible. And a fluctuating market for office space sapped hope of a profitable commercial base.

The new city-state plan offers the only hope now. The state would condemn the land for the Urban Development Corporation, which has already absorbed the Battery Park Authority. Extending city streets would

create practical lots related to Lower Manhattan, with handsome river views. This plan is both rational and achievable. But there is a price, and a gamble. An \$8-million state appropriation is needed to carry the bonds for four more years, and the Urban Development Corporation must find developers.

With the new American Stock Exchange headquarters now committed to a landfill site just beyond the World Trade Center, and with the lure of unusual tax abatements, there is new hope for commercial construction. The U.D.C. will bear the cost of building streets and utilities, subject to the city's approval. Eventually, if the debts can be paid, the land would revert to the city.

The delays of Westway still sabotage local development. There remain uncertainties about total costs and about the future of Lower Manhattan. The sense of failure that pervades Battery Park City is a handicap.

But doing nothing seems worse. The land would remain desolate. Some suggest a city park, but no one seriously thinks the millions needed to pay off the current obligations and acquire the land would be found. The \$8-million gamble seems like the project's last chance before it sinks into a grave of financial trouble. Battery Park City may have been a planning catastrophe, but it is now too valuable a resource to abandon.