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Chinatown Residents Frustrated Over Street Closed Since 9/11

By [CARA BUCKLEY](#)

It was the evening rush one recent night in lower Chinatown, and chaos was unfolding in its usual way.

Cars slowed to a crawl around Chatham Square, an asterisk of an intersection where seven streets converge. Traffic safety officers frantically waved their white-gloved hands, trying to unsnarl the mess. Pedestrians, some bent double over walkers, shuffled across streets as disorderly columns of cars roared by.

But one street, Park Row, which once fed into Chatham Square, was strangely still. Aside from the occasional city bus or official vehicle, it was barren of cars and, instead, was filled with rust-streaked concrete barriers.

Park Row has historically been a major four-lane artery linking the financial district to Chinatown. It begins at Broadway by City Hall Park, zigzags under the Brooklyn Bridge, hugs the length of the New York Police Department's headquarters and ends at Chatham Square.

To the growing fury of many people living nearby, Park Row's eastern half, from the Brooklyn Bridge to Chatham Square, has been closed to commuter traffic since Sept. 11, 2001, even as other streets and public spaces in Lower Manhattan have reopened.

The Police Department says that most of Park Row has to be blocked off to protect its headquarters, called One Police Plaza, against terrorist threats, particularly truck bombs.

But many people who live and work in the area say the six-year shutdown has harmed the character and economic vibrancy of much of Chinatown. Having the police close by, they say, has done their community more harm than good.

Besides Park Row, three other streets near the headquarters are blocked off wholly or in part, though pedestrians and official vehicles are generally allowed through.

Residents of Chatham Green, a 21-story co-op on Park Row near Chatham Square, have to show identification every time they drive up to and out of their building because its driveway lies beyond a police barricade and a security checkpoint. A driveway to another residential building, Chatham Towers, is behind the barricade, too.

Residents blame the barricades for increased home insurance rates; others complain the barriers slow emergency vehicles.

Shop owners at the foot of nearby Mott Street say that business is down and that store turnover and vacancy rates have climbed. Traffic heading through Chatham Square now clogs narrower lanes, like St. James Place and Worth Street.

“I hate it. I don’t feel like I have real freedom,” said Joe D’Amico, 27, a middle school teacher who has lived in Chatham Green for seven years. “I’m only let into my building at the whim of a cop.”

Members of the Civic Center Residents Coalition, a group based in Chinatown, have been fighting the security footprint around police headquarters for years. They recognize the department’s security concerns but oppose policies they say have placed a chokehold on their neighborhood. The group argues that if police headquarters is such a terrorist mark, then it should be moved out of a residential area altogether.

“If closing Park Row is contingent on a target, then remove the target,” said Jan Lee, a member of the coalition who owns a furniture shop near the foot of Mott Street.

But Paul J. Browne, the Police Department’s chief spokesman, said the headquarters was not moving. He said the police had tried to alleviate the impact of the security measures, in part by stopping officers from parking in nearby public spaces and by reopening a stairway that skirts the headquarters’ south side and leads down to street level near the Brooklyn Bridge.

The department also plans to redesign its guard booths and security barriers to make them more attractive, Mr. Browne said, and is involved in efforts to convert two lanes of Park Row into a pedestrian greenway. “The Police Department has worked hard to be responsive to the community while maintaining the requisite level of security for this sensitive location,” he said.

But many residents see the idea of a greenway as a thinly disguised effort to close Park Row as a thoroughfare for good. “It sounds like a Trojan horse,” said Danny Chen, who lives in Chatham Green.

Plans are also in the early stages to reconfigure Chatham Square by moving a public square that holds a soaring statue of Lin Ze Xu, a 19th-century Chinese official, and linking the Bowery, on the north side of the square, directly to St. James Place, on the south, and other streets. Many residents are leery about this step too.

The coalition has enlisted powerful local figures in its fight, including [Sheldon Silver](#), the speaker of the State Assembly, who represents the Lower East Side and Chinatown. He said the continued closing of Park Row was sure to worsen congestion in Lower Manhattan and Chinatown with the rebuilding of ground zero under way.

“The brilliant minds have to get together,” Mr. Silver said. “With all the technology that’s available today, they can accommodate the needs of security and the needs of the community.”

Yet security experts and urban planners say the heightened protection around One Police Plaza is a necessary piece of the post-Sept. 11 landscape.

All of New York has had to adapt since the attacks, said Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at [New York University](#)'s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.

“Park Row is not just a corridor to Chinatown, but it’s a barrier between the New York Police Department and potential vulnerability,” he said.

Despite the widespread anger caused by the security perimeter, some Chinatown residents say they have seen some benefits. Nita Canapa, an elderly woman who lives in Chatham Green, said it was now easier for her to walk across Park Row. Jin Lei, 40, a computer programmer who also lives in Chatham Green, says he likes the comparable peacefulness of the street and feels more secure.

The coalition opposing the security measures has waged successful fights against the police before.

Ruling in 2003 on a suit filed by the group, a State Supreme Court judge, Walter B. Tolub, ordered the police to stop using a small park near its headquarters as a parking lot. The group successfully petitioned the city to allow buses to go down Park Row again. The Police Department was ordered in 2005 to conduct an environmental impact study of the street closings around its headquarters, including barricaded parts of Madison and Pearl Streets.

The final report is 372 pages long and was released in early August. It concluded that while some effects of the security measures could be mitigated, others, like increased noise and traffic congestion, might be permanent nuisances.

But neighborhood leaders say the report understated the impact of the sealed-off streets and wrongly characterized the closings as inevitable.

“This was a critical link for Chinatown, and it’s such an insult to Chinatown for them to downplay the impact,” said Jeanie Chin, a member of the coalition, standing at the foot of Park Row one morning last week. “They’re treating the community the same as terrorists,” she said.