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Clear tower favorite: Jury gives nod to one Transbay terminal plan

By: John King

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The formal vote is two weeks away, but now there's a front-runner in the competition to build what could become San Francisco's tallest tower: the team that has offered \$200 million more for the land than either of its rivals.

That team, led by developer Hines and Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects, is offering \$350 million for the right to build an obelisk-like, 1,200-foot office tower at First and Mission streets alongside a new Transbay Terminal. The team also designed a new terminal that would be topped by an elevated park the length of five football fields.

Two other teams are in the running for the project, and the winner will be selected in a vote by the board of the Transbay Joint Powers Authority on Sept. 20. On Monday, though, the jury advising the Transbay Authority released a report that calls the Hines-Pelli proposal "superior to the other two" on all counts - aesthetics and functionality as well as economics.

After the report was released, Transbay board members stressed that they will make their decision by drawing on public comments and other factors besides the seven-member panel of design and real estate experts. But the jury's emphatic endorsement of the Hines-Pelli team suggests that it will be a hard choice to overturn.

"For me, the jury recommendation is what I'll mainly be basing my vote on," said Chris Daly, a San Francisco supervisor and one of the five members of the appointed Transbay board. "The only caveat is financial. I don't want to support a project that's not real."

The \$350 million Hines-Pelli offer is based on the anticipated rent from an 80-story, 1.8 million-square-foot office building. By comparison, the other two teams in the bidding proposed towers that include housing and hotels as well as office space, and both bid less than \$150 million.

"We are confident it's the right amount, and we were careful with our analysis," said Paul Paradis, a senior vice president at Hines, which has built four other towers in the city. "San Francisco is a core real estate market. This project represents the opportunity to do the best building in the city, with views pretty much in all directions."

If the board endorses the jury's recommendation, the Transbay Authority would enter into exclusive negotiations with the Hines-Pelli team. Transbay officials hope to open the new terminal by 2014.

It is estimated that building the new terminal, along with related neighborhood projects, will cost roughly \$1 billion. The second phase of the Transbay project would bring commuter trains from the Peninsula to the terminal, along with potential high-speed rail. That phase has an estimated cost of \$2.4 billion, most of which has not yet been accounted for.

According to the jury report, the Hines-Pelli proposal "fits beautifully as part of the urban form of San Francisco both from an aerial perspective and at ground level."

The tapering tower was described as "a simple, elegant solution" to the task of adding a tower to the skyline that conceivably could reach 350 feet above the Transamerica Pyramid, which now is San Francisco's tallest building.

The terminal itself - a 70-foot-tall structure that would stretch from Beale Street almost to Second Street, with room inside for commuter buses from around the region - was praised for such functional elements as "clear circulation for bus and rail passengers."

But the jury saved its most enthusiastic praise for the rooftop park, which would cover 5.4 acres and include plantings designed to help recirculate water used by the terminal and tower.

"The park would add much-needed green space to the neighborhood for a growing number of residents and would be an exciting and unique new destination within the city," the jury wrote, adding that "it transforms (the roof) to a living, breathing urban organism."

Paradis conceded that one reason for the park is pragmatic: It's a proactive response to environmental concerns about adding a tower to the skyline that would be roughly the height of the Empire State Building.

"San Francisco is sensitive to shadow and community impacts," Paradis said. "The tower would create a sizable shadow, but we feel that having this park is a great way to mitigate that shadow. It can also be a great amenity for the neighborhood."

The second highest score went to a team that includes developer Forest City Enterprises with renowned English architect Richard Rogers and his firm. That proposal includes a futuristic erector-set-like glass tower framed in steel and a purchase price offer of \$145 million. The terminal would be the leanest of the three proposed, removing a concourse and instead having an open-air market along the ground.

The lowest ranking went to a team consisting of Rockefeller Development Group Corp. and the local office of the architecture firm Skidmore Owings & Merrill. This team proposes the tallest tower, a 1,375-foot high-rise that would twist and narrow as it rises. It offered \$118,440,700 for the land. Its design would compress the terminal functions into less space than Transbay engineers recommend, opening up Fremont Street to the sky and creating room for an outdoor performance space.

Representatives of the other two teams indicated Monday that they'll stay in the race, gambling that the board will part ways with the jury.

"Our choice of uses and design ... incorporates wonderful cultural elements that truly contribute to the creation and evolution of the new Transbay neighborhood," said Keith Brown, a consultant to the Rockefeller-Skidmore team. "We remain hopeful that the Transbay board members will look beyond this initial recommendation and reach their own conclusions."

Similarly, a representative of the Forest City-Rogers team said their proposal offers "superlative architecture, a highly functional transit center and a genuine commitment to the community. ... It is our hope that the Transbay board carefully considers the economic viability of its final selection."

Officially, that's what board members say they will do.

"The jury's recommendation is very important, and the members did an exhaustive amount of work," said Jerry Hill, a San Mateo County supervisor and the chair of the Transbay board. "But it's not the final decision."

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How to get involved

To give your opinion on the competing proposals - and to review the three proposals and the jury report - go to www.transbaycenter.org. Also, models and displays of each proposal are on exhibit at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., San Francisco.