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San Francisco Tower Proposals Challenge Empire State Building

By Dan Levy

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Sept. 20 (Bloomberg) -- San Franciscans soon may have to crane their necks back a bit farther to gaze up at the city's tallest buildings.

City officials are pushing for construction of two office and residential towers of 1,200 feet (366 meters) or more -- at least 80 stories. They would dwarf the Transamerica Pyramid, which at 853 feet has been the tallest building in San Francisco since 1972.

The new structures would challenge the 1,250-foot height of the Empire State Building in New York, the second-tallest U.S. building. It's "imperative" for San Francisco to keep pace as super-tall towers spring up around the globe, Mayor Gavin Newsom said in a statement.

"Tall buildings are symbols of cities that don't want to be left behind in a competitive world," architect Daniel Libeskind, who worked on designs for towers to replace Manhattan's World Trade Center, said in an interview.

The Transbay Joint Powers Authority, which is supervising redevelopment of the Transbay Terminal site, is scheduled to pick a plan for one high-rise today. Three groups are vying in the city-sponsored competition to put a tower as high as 1,375 feet at the southeast corner of First and Mission streets, near the financial district in the South of Market neighborhood.

The entrants are Richard Rogers, a winner of the Pritzker Prize, architecture's top award, with Forest City Enterprises Inc. of Cleveland; Cesar Pelli, who designed the twin Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, the world's second-tallest occupied buildings, with Hines of Houston; and Skidmore Owings & Merrill LLP, the firm designing New York's 1,776-foot Freedom Tower, with Rockefeller Development Group Inc. of New York.

White Obelisk

"No other project has gotten my attention like this one," Pelli said last month. His design for a slender, obelisk-shaped tower received the nonbinding recommendation of a nine-person advisory panel appointed by the authority.

The authority is selling the land to one of the groups on the condition that it design a rail and bus terminal for adjacent property.

A separate project, by architect Renzo Piano, proposes a 1,200-foot high-rise across the street on the northwest corner. His design, which is at an early stage in the approval process,

resembles "a series of towers, like organ pipes," said Dean Macris, San Francisco's planning director.

Cities around the world are constructing ever-taller buildings to distinguish themselves and showcase engineering and architectural know-how, said Libeskind, who is designing towers for Warsaw and for Busan, South Korea.

Tall Newcomers

Since 2000, 11 towers higher than 1,000 feet have been completed, including the tallest occupied building, Taiwan's Taipei 101, at 1,670 feet. Forty-six more are set to open by 2011, according to the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat in Chicago. The Sears Tower in Chicago is the tallest U.S. building at 1,451 feet.

Adding towers would be a sea change for San Francisco, a city whose architecture of Victorian homes and the Golden Gate Bridge helps define its character. In the past, many San Franciscans derided high-rise proposals as an unwelcome "Manhattanization" of its hills and bayside location, said Kevin Starr, California's state librarian emeritus and now professor of history at the University of Southern California.

"There was hostility to big-time urbanism," Starr said. "The Transamerica Pyramid only got through the Planning Commission by one vote. It was favored by the mayor and opposed by the planning director."

Environmentally Sensitive

High-rise construction is cost-effective and environmentally friendly, making it more practical as the global population increases, Libeskind said.

The tower plans emphasize energy efficiency, recycled building materials and access to transit. They are supported by the mayor, the Board of Supervisors and planning and redevelopment officials who say the skyscrapers will be aesthetically pleasing and public-oriented.

"This is a great opportunity to have smart, dense growth that accommodates our needs downtown," said Macris, the planning director. "We're only talking about two superior towers, not a thicket of thousand-foot buildings."

Both towers would be built in the South of Market area, where more than 1,000 high-rise condo units and 1 million square feet (93,000 square meters) of office space are under construction. The city wants to rezone the area for bigger buildings, Macris said.

Some Qualms

While no groups have announced opposition to the new tower plans, some San Francisco residents have reservations.

James Qualters, 56, who works on the California Street cable-car line and has lived in the city for 33 years, said he has safety concerns.

“It's too tall, and this is earthquake country,” he said. “Once you build it, it's going to be staring you in the face.”

Skyscraper design in seismic zones isn't an issue today, said David Scott, an engineer and chairman of the Council on Tall Buildings. Computer modeling can simulate earthquakes and help engineers design buildings that can withstand even severe shaking, he said.

Visitors admiring the skyline while strolling along the Embarcadero this week said the city might want to leave well enough alone.

“This place has got character,” said Ed Gerardo, 29, of Boston. “The new buildings would detract instead of add.”

Agustin Pindado, 30, chimed in. “It's magical here,” he said.