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Ambitious Downtown Transit Project Is at Hand

BY BRAD STONE

In 2010, San Francisco will finally bring out the wrecking balls and cement mixers and embark on a grand overhaul of its downtown. The project could eventually result in a half-dozen new skyscrapers, including a 1,200-foot tower whose gracefully tapered top would add a defining element to the iconography of the upwardly mobile skyline.

Much of this grand transformation, which would leave the 853-foot Transamerica pyramid as the second-tallest structure in the city, is still in the conceptual stages. The ambitious plan for a new urban neighborhood could be scaled back. But the centerpiece of the project—a \$4.2 billion public transit hub—has enough financing to begin construction, and the first dirt could be turned as early as March.

In the process, the squat, malodorous building at First and Mission Streets will be razed and replaced by the Transbay Transit Center, a sparkling multiuse building with links to regional bus service, Bay Area Rapid Transit trains and California's proposed high-speed rail line.

"What's unusual about the whole Transbay redevelopment proposal is that it will expand downtown dramatically as well as completely change the physical profile of the city," said Jasper Rubin, a former city planner and an assistant professor of urban studies and planning at San Francisco State



Planners say the Transbay Transit Center, which is scheduled to be completed in 2015, will serve 45 million passengers a year.

University. "It's an incredibly ambitious plan."

Gabe Metcalf, executive director of the nonprofit San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, said, "I have never seen a project get this far along and not be built."

The project, designed by Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects of New Haven, could ultimately be a signature structure in a carbon-sensitive city that professes devotion to public transportation.

It could also change the way San Francisco sees itself and serve notice that a financially strapped city and state are still capable of undertaking bold

public projects, even in an age characterized by bureaucratic stalemates and endless wrangling over spending.

The new terminal, scheduled to be built over five years, would serve as the anchor of a dense, dynamic neighborhood that would be filled with a mix of housing and skyscrapers. It will also include a shopping center and an elevated 5.4-acre park, potentially becoming a bustling meeting place for downtown workers and weekend wanderers alike.

Discussions of the project stretch back to the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, which led to

the demolition of the elevated Embarcadero freeway that divided the neighborhoods south of Market Street. The area around the 70-year-old bus terminal has since sprouted some new office and residential towers, but still has blocks of unsightly parking lots, bus ramps and the station itself, which often feels more like a hub for the homeless than for rush-hour commuters.

Over the years, city planners, activists and voters considered a wide range of issues related to replacing the terminal: where the new transit center should be, who would design it and how it would be financed.

TRANSBAY JOINT POWERS AUTHORITY

Surprisingly, San Franciscans never mounted much protest to the idea of new high-rises, despite fierce resistance to such initiatives in the 1970s and early '80s when people worried about the "Manhattanization" of the city. In the last decade, planning picked up steam as the need to bring jobs and housing into the city's center—and to take cars off the clogged roads—intensified.

Cesar Pelli, the project's lead architect since his firm won a design competition in 2007, calls the central office tower aesthetic "elegant and simple." But Mr. Pelli said his firm left "the exuberance of the design for the transit center, which is meant to be an extraordinary public facility."

Drawings of the new bus and train station show a light-drenched, multilevel glass structure that will span five blocks, from Second to Main Street. A transparent roof will provide broad visibility to the leafy park above, which is meant to serve as a sort of urban retreat and amphitheater.

Planners say the terminal, scheduled for completion in 2015, will serve 45 million passengers a year, eliminate 8,000 automobile trips daily, and offer a mass-transit link between San Francisco to Silicon Valley, the other economic engine in the Bay Area.

A second phase of the transit plan, with construction set to begin in 2014, is more tenuous at this point. It calls for extending the Caltrain commuter line more than a mile from the current Townsend Street station to the new center, a huge undertaking that would mean tunneling under 2nd Street. Also in the plan: a hub for California's proposed high-speed rail network, which would require state and federal taxpayers to

come up with tens of billions of dollars in addition to a \$10 billion bond voters approved in 2008.

To bring the first part of the plan close to reality, planners have tapped a remarkable number of revenue sources, including bridge tolls, additional sales taxes across the region and a variety of federal grants and loans.

But there are still unexpected shortfalls that could delay plans. The Transbay Joint Powers Authority, which manages the project, had long hoped to raise around a half-billion dollars from the sale of land around the site to developers and bring in additional money through fees that allowed them to surpass skyscraper height limits.

But the recession has hurt the sales effort. Last summer, the agency withdrew the first parcel from the market after bids for the property were shockingly low. The agency is now deferring land sales until the real estate market improves while trying to compensate with other revenue streams.

One hope is that the federal government will save the day. San Francisco has asked for \$400 million from an \$8 billion stimulus fund being administered by the Federal Railroad Administration for high-speed rail projects. Planners want to use the money to install the train station, or so-called "train box," underneath the terminal during the first phase, which could shave a hundred million from the overall cost of the project, compared to the cost of adding it later.

A decision on that money is due in the next two months, but somewhat ominously, virtually every other state has also submitted proposals—some 260 in



The existing transportation terminal will be demolished and replaced with the sparkling new transit center.

all—for a total of \$57 billion, said Warren Flatau, a spokesman for the railroad administration.

San Francisco has the lobbying clout of Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the House of Representatives, on its side. But if planners do not get they money, architects will have to spend at least an additional four months to redesign the transit center without the train levels.

Maria Ayerdi-Kaplan, executive director of the Transbay Joint Powers Authority, said construction would begin this year regardless of what happened with the stimulus financing. But Ms. Kaplan also concedes that "the longer you delay a project, the more expensive it becomes."

On the east side of the designated project area on the corner of Howard and Main Streets, a temporary bus terminal was just built to accommodate the Greyhound, AC Transit and Muni bus lines and their riders when the old bus terminal is torn down.

By last week, the temporary terminal looked complete, save for some rerouting of traffic. Construction crews were awaiting the arrival of a pole

bearing an original Art Deco sculpture of the Greyhound mascot. It could symbolize the idea that San Francisco is ready to sprint into the future.