

The Central Subway – A Disaster for Muni and San Francisco

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“San Francisco Mayor Sunny Jim Rolph and his engineer MM O’Shaughnessey created one of the greatest municipal transportation systems in the world. Today Muni carries 700,000 riders a day and serves the giant collection of small businesses that form the backbone of the San Francisco’s economy. And now Muni is being threatened with strangulation by a gaggle of opportunists pushing a tiny, badly-engineered subway that will serve virtually no one and wreck Chinatown, particularly Stockton Street and one of the GREAT farmers markets on the West Coast” Zach Redington Stewart, San Francisco Architect.

San Francisco is a special city. What makes it special is hard to boil down to a few words but it has to do with the hills, the clear air, the Bridges, the surrounding Bay, the parks, the street patterns, the alleys, the intimate, pedestrian-oriented nature of its architecture, the variety and vibrancy of its 60,000 small businesses and its general vitality. This makes it vulnerable. You can’t just stick something big in the middle of San Francisco and hope things will come out right.

For this reason San Franciscans have often been called upon to stop the short-sighted and foolish schemes of self-serving individuals and City government. Fortunately, putting the brakes on City Hall has become a time-honored San Francisco practice, responsible for the timely and welcome demise of many destructive public and private ventures.

In the case of the Central Subway, San Francisco’s government has really gone off the deep end.

The idea of extending the Muni’s Third Street light rail line northward into Chinatown sounded good at first. After all, why not? Transportation along traffic-clogged Stockton Street had always been difficult and so why not extend the Third Street light rail line northward along Fourth Street and then under Market and Stockton Street to Chinatown?

Had the subway been planned and laid out correctly it could have worked. But the project soon went off the rails. First came the decision to route the extension under rather than over the Market Street subways. This required a very deep tunnel under Market Street, thereby making it impossible to create an efficient transfer between the Central Subway and the Market Street subways. At the same time costs began to rise, from the \$647 million listed in the November, 2003 Voter’s Handbook, to \$700 million in 2004, to \$1,580 million today. In response to escalating costs came a series of additional unfortunate decisions (e.g. to build one instead of the needed two Chinatown stations, to constrict the future carrying-capacity of the subway, to cut tens of thousands of bus hours a year out of the bus lines serving northeastern San Francisco, to delete the moving pedestrian ramps between the Union Square and Powell Street Stations, and to ignore the surface mess on Stockton Street).

As the Central Subway concept unraveled, the two City agencies charged with developing the project began to focus on pursuing the federal dollars rather than on the once-in-a-century opportunity to actually do something for transportation in eastern San Francisco. In a frenzy of federal fund-chasing, the MTA (the agency that operates Muni) and the TA (the agency that administers the local sales tax) put salesmanship ahead of analysis and data-manipulation ahead of objectivity. By deviating from their normal and proper roles and perverting their data the two agencies managed to create, at least temporarily, a grossly inflated image of what is in reality an exceptionally weak project. This perversion of responsibility has already caused great damage and, if not rectified, will undermine the future effectiveness of the entire Muni system.

As a result of these actions the Central Subway has become synonymous with inflated ridership figures, understated operating costs, distorted trip times and a “low-ball” cost estimate. In addition the MTA has unaccountably savaged one of Muni’s most cherished and highly-valued traditions; namely, the easy and convenient transfer. As things stand, future Central Subway users would be burdened by significantly longer transfer walks to Market Street, to the Powell Street Station and to 25 of the 30 east-west Muni lines crossing Fourth and Stockton Streets.

In their zeal to promote the Central Subway, the two agencies, egged on by a Chinatown development group eager to obtain federal housing funds as a result of the project, have sold the rest of Chinatown and San Francisco's local politicians a bill of goods.

Following are some of the ways in which data has been distorted and misused to hard-sell the project:

Under-estimated Capital Costs: As a harbinger of things to come, the MTA’s initial “not-to-exceed” estimate for Central Subway Program Management was \$82 million. By the time negotiations with the favored consulting firm ended, the price had almost doubled, to \$147 million.

Dozens of dilapidated older structures line the route of the proposed subway. Yet the total estimated price of acquiring and/or protecting these buildings during and after construction is shown in the EIR as being only \$67 million. The MTA did not comply with our Freedom of Information Act request for a breakdown of this questionable figure.

Distorted Operating Costs: In the draft EIR, published in October 2007, the MTA showed the subway as saving Muni \$23.8 million a year by 2030. This figure was used in dozens of public meetings, along with inflated ridership figures and distorted trip times, to convince elements of Chinatown of the merit of the Project. Pursuant to SaveMuni.com’s November 2007 challenge of this absurd claim, the figure plummeted. By the time the final EIR was issued 9 months later, the projected 2030 cost savings had dropped from \$23.8 million a year saved to just \$3.18 million a year saved. But it was still a savings, and consequently still used as part of the MTA’s Central Subway sales pitch in dozens of additional public meetings.

Three months ago the MTA sent its New Starts Report to the federal government. In the New Starts Report the MTA finally acknowledged what SaveMuni.com has been saying for three years; namely that the Central Subway would actually increase Muni's 2030 operating costs. The

New Starts Report shows that by 2030 the Central Subway instead of saving Muni \$3.18 million a year would actually cost Muni an extra \$6.89 million a year.

Yet as recently as November 18, 2010, MTA Program Manager John Funghi was still assuring his Citizens Advisory Group that "*by carrying people more efficiently*" the Central Subway would save Muni money.

Inflated Ridership Projections: At the same time non-existent Muni cost savings were being trumpeted, a siren song of high future Central Subway ridership was being sung, again using grossly inaccurate data. Particularly misleading was the common MTA practice of lumping the ridership of the 5-mile existing T-Line in with Central Subway ridership. Here is a chronology of how the estimates of future Central Subway ridership were distorted during the past 3/12 years:

- o March 3, 2007: MTA spokesperson Maggie Lynch was quoted in an San Francisco Examiner article as stating that by 2030 Central Subway ridership would be 93,000 riders a day
- o March 20, 2007: At an MTA meeting she had it at 90,000 riders a day
- o October, 2007: The draft EIR showed the combined subway/T-Line ridership as being 99,230 riders a day
- o February 22, 2008: An Examiner editorial put Central Subway ridership at 80,000 riders a day
- o September, 2008: In the Final EIR the figure dropped to 76,600 riders a day
- o August, 2009: Program Manager Funghi on City Vision had it back up to 78,000 riders a day
- o February 9, 2010: At the first Central Subway groundbreaking Mayor Gavin Newsom announced that by 2030 the subway would be carrying 76,000 riders a day
- o September, 2010: MTA's New Starts Report submitted to the federal government showed the combined 2030 ridership of the subway and the 5-mile existing T-Line as being only 64,620 riders a day.....with the \$1.6 billion subway itself generating only an anemic 42,400 riders a day. (Source EIR Table 3-9)
- o December 8, 2010: MTA web site continues to show the Central Subway as carrying 76,000 riders a day

Note: According to EIR Table 3-9, 67% of the 14,700 riders a day expected to board the T-Line at the 4th and King stop by 2030, would be transferring Caltrain riders. When Caltrain is extended to the new Transbay Terminal, the projected Central Subway ridership would therefore take another big hit.

Distorted Trip Times: In the EIR and in public meetings the MTA discusses only “on-board” trip times, repeatedly citing faster on-board speeds as evidence of the superiority of the Subway. Never mentioned were the extra times required to walk to and from the subway stations, descend and ascend 70 to 100 feet by escalator or stairway, walk substantially greater distances between lines when transferring, and enduring longer waits on platforms. With these auxiliary times included and taken into account, the total trip times experienced by most Muni riders would be longer and less convenient by subway than by surface bus. For a comparison of four typical trip times, go to <http://www3.savemuni.com/> and click on “perceived travel times”.

Quiet Cuts in Bus Service: The EIR showed the Central Subway Project as removing 76,400 bus hours a year or 27% from the lines now serving Chinatown and the rest of northeastern San Francisco. Yet at no time did the MTA explain the impact of these draconian cuts to the affected Chinatown, North Beach, Telegraph Hill, Russian Hill, Fisherman’s Wharf, Polk Gulch, Marina, Golden Gate Valley, Pacific Heights, Cow Hollow and Presidio neighborhoods. In the New Starts Report the MTA shows only 34,426 hours a year, a figure less than half that contained in all previous Central Subway documents. If the bus cuts shown in the New Starts Report stand, the result would be a 12% cut in bus service on lines that will experience only a 10% diversion of riders from bus to subway. Given the cattle car conditions that often prevail on the buses now operating on Stockton Street, the prognosis for the users of the Muni 8x, 30 and 45 line remains bleak.

New Riders: Central Subway "New Riders" are defined as people who begin using Muni because of the subway. According to the EIR, the Central Subway would attract 18,400 new riders a day by 2030. In the New Starts Report this figure was cut to 16,146 new riders a day. Since the total Subway trip times are in most cases higher than those of today's buses, it is not immediately apparent why the subway would be attracting newcomers, especially now that the moving ramps between the Union Square Station and the Powell Street Station have been removed.

In sum, the New Starts Report shows a huge drop in previously proclaimed Central Subway ridership estimates, a major change in the impact of the subway on existing bus service, a reduced number of new riders and a pivotal swing from Muni cost savings to Muni cost increases. This suggests that the Feds have caught onto the game and are therefore demanding accuracy in place of salesmanship.

Diversion of the T-Line: Today’s T-Line riders enjoy direct (although unnecessarily slow) access to all the Market Street subway stations. If the Central Subway is built these T-Line riders will be routed away from Market to the Union Square Station where they will be obliged to walk back to the Powell Street Station in order to use the Market Street subway lines. So far there has been little effort to explain the T-Line rerouting plan and its impact to the affected residents of the Mission Bay, Dog Patch, Bayview, Hunters Point, Little Hollywood, Excelsior and Visitation Valley neighborhoods.

MTA's Refusal to Provide Back-up: In an effort to evaluate some of the MTA's outlandish claims, SaveMuni.com has repeatedly requested back-up data, most recently through a series of Freedom of Information Act requests. The MTA has steadfastly refused to provide the requested information, preferring instead to direct us to massive public reports that for the most part fail to address the specific questions raised.

Subway Sold on False Pretenses: SaveMuni.com believes that the Central Subway has been sold to elements of Chinatown and to San Francisco's politicians based on false pretenses. The campaign to expose the major flaws in the project and the data manipulation in hopes of heading off the project before it does major damage to Chinatown and the rest of San Francisco will continue. Muni has many unmet improvement needs, including in particular the need to improve transportation conditions along Stockton Street, and there are consequently many ways of putting Central Subway funds to better use than wasting it on an overpriced subway of marginal usefulness.

Right now the best hope of ending this latest assault on San Francisco appears to lie with the federal Department of Transportation and DOT's Federal Transportation Administration (FTA), headed by FTA Administrator Peter Rogoff. The FTA's recent letter to MTA Director Nat Ford was clear and unequivocal (see insert).

Given the Muni's weak financial state and the ill-conceived nature of the Central Subway, the MTA would be hard-pressed to legitimately these conditions.

This paper was prepared by Gerald Cauthen of SaveMuni.com. For more information about SaveMuni.com please see our website.