

THE CENTRAL SUBWAY PROJECT — San Francisco's Railway to Nowhere?

By J.J. Barrow

PART ONE: The Demise of a Freeway Leads to Light Rail Dreams

Rather than spend tens of millions of dollars to save the unpopular Embarcadero Freeway after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, San Francisco tore the freeway down and put the Embarcadero Boulevard in its place.

That economic decision set the stage for one of the most expensive transportation projects in the country: the \$1.58 billion, 1.7 mile long Central Subway, an extension of the Third Street light rail line, to be constructed between Washington and Stockton streets in Chinatown to the 4th and King Street Caltrain station.

This is a story about neighborhood power politics and federal dollars that led Muni into deficit spending, with costs in the future that may negatively affect transportation city-wide. And the subway project itself may not live up to its premise of transportation justice: to provide better, faster public transportation in the city's most densely populated neighborhood.

"If the political will were there, Stockton Street could be improved in two years," said Gerald Cauthen, a member of SaveMuni, a group opposed to the subway, and a former transit engineer. "But the game is to get the money from Washington."

The subway project is billed by Muni officials as the best solution to solve overcrowding on bus routes that serve the area, particularly the 30-Stockton and 45-Union-Stockton. They say it will ease road congestion downtown and bring new money to Chinatown. The latter, they argue, has suffered declining business within the past two decades — which some business leaders link to the demise of the Embarcadero Freeway.

The city officials are also backed up by two nonprofit transportation and housing advocacy organizations. One is the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR), an influential planning organization that's been around since 1910. It's affected city policies and ballot measures from Muni union negotiations to major capital projects like the upcoming bus rapid transit (BRT) project on Geary and Van Ness, and the Central Subway. The second group is the Chinatown Community Development Center (or Chinatown CDC), a 35 year-old organization that manages more than 2,000 units of low-income housing across the city and operates planning and advocacy arms that lobby city agencies. It has members on citizen advisory committees for Muni, the San Francisco County Transportation Authority and the Bay Area's Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

Critics of the subway plan include SaveMuni, a 40-member transit advocacy group that's made arguing against the subway its central cause, and other transit organizations, plus the Sierra Club. Politicians against the subway include City Attorney Dennis Herrera, former city supervisors Aaron Peskin and Jake McGoldrick, BART board member Tom Radulovich and U.S. Representative Tom McClintock. They argue it's unclear if the subway will achieve its goals, and suggest there are faster and far less costly means to improve the area. Acting as a public watchdog, San Francisco County's 19-member volunteer Civil Grand Jury decided to investigate the increasingly controversial project. In an advisory report issued in July 2011, they agreed with critics that the project is "too much money for too little benefit."

But the report was only advisory, and the condemnation of local politicians and groups like SaveMuni against the project has been ineffective. Major construction for the subway began in December 2011, and it is expected to open to the public in 2019.

This series of articles will explore the Central Subway project, starting with the premise that first moved it along — a desire to restore the traffic to

Chinatown that was lost when the Embarcadero Freeway came down. Will the Central Subway do this? From every angle, critics claim the answer is no.

Even within the Chinatown business community, some dissidents understand this. One is Tane Chan, owner of the Wok Shop at Grant and Commercial streets for 40 years. "It won't do a darn thing for business," she said. "It's a subway to nowhere."

Muni expects the central subway will have 35,100 daily boardings by 2030. In comparison, the 1.2 mile Embarcadero Freeway shuttled 60,000 cars a day through Chinatown in the 1980s. The Embarcadero Boulevard — which cost the city \$10 million — has been hailed as a city planning triumph. However, if rebuilding the Embarcadero Freeway would have prevented the Central Subway Project, then it would have been the cheaper option. The freeway was considered an eyesore by many, one that blocked views of the bay. But rebuilding it would have only cost San Francisco \$70 million back in 1991, according to a San Francisco Chronicle article from the period. That's about \$120 million today, with inflation.

In literature explaining the project, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency suggests the Central Subway is comparable to the more-expensive Second Avenue Subway project in New York. The latter, however, anticipates more than 200,000 boardings per weekday, compared to 35,100 for the Central Subway. Another similar project in downtown Los Angeles will cost \$1.4 billion for 1.9 miles of rail, but it expects 88,200 weekday boardings.

To transportation experts, the idea that the Central Subway will replace the traffic from the Embarcadero freeway appears unfounded. True, without the freeway, "customers who were coming from other parts of the Bay Area stopped coming, except some loyal customers on the weekends," said Michael Chung, who has worked at tea importer Superior Trading Company on Washington Street in Chinatown for 25 years.

Chung, however, isn't sure East Bay customers would return even if transportation to the district improved, because other Bay Area Chinatowns have flourished over the past two decades. When the Embarcadero freeway went down, Oakland's Chinatown was already swelling in size with more space to offer residents at lower rents. Now it's as large as 34,000 people. In a sign of the times, Oakland elected its first Asian-American mayor, Jean Quan, in 2010. Moreover, San Jose's Chinatown has grown in size and success thanks to Silicon Valley. Large Asian-American populations in Fremont and Milpitas mean there are now even more shopping options around the Bay Area.

These aren't observations lost on Chinatown businessmen. "It's more convenient for those customers to shop in Oakland Chinatown," said Chung. "We have competition now."

Local business and transportation experts are a little puzzled that the Embarcadero Freeway could be blamed for a decline in business in Chinatown in the first place. "It wasn't like that was a convenient freeway," said Cynthia Kroll, a senior regional economist at the Fisher Center for Real Estate and Urban Economics. "It was a congested freeway. It was easier to get to Chinatown, but it was still hard to drive and park there."

Transportation experts pointed to the pedestrian-friendly changes made in the area since — large sidewalks, islands and crosswalks. These have been hailed as a city-planning triumph, they argued and would have only increased foot traffic — and the number of potential shoppers — in the area.

"Taking out this ugly elevated freeway helped all neighborhoods near the waterfront," said Robert Cervero, a UC Berkeley professor who co-wrote a research paper for the Journal of Urbanism on the removal of the freeway.

Embarcadero Boulevard probably drew more tourists and restaurant-goers to Chinatown, said Cervero. He added that the district's convenient location

between the popular downtown and North Beach areas is a far more important factor in its business than its transportation options.

Since the Embarcadero Boulevard was an efficient replacement for the freeway, the logic of adding the expensive Central Subway has stumped critics. The 2010 - 2011 San Francisco Civil Grand Jury selected the Central Subway project as one of its annual topics of investigation, and condemned the project in the summer of 2011. Muni "is currently unable to adequately maintain its fleet in good working order," it wrote in a report. "Adding a new capital project while struggling to meet current needs could overwhelm the agency's ability to deliver service."

The Central Subway will add four new trains and four new stations to Muni's responsibilities; one station above ground at 4th and Brannan Street near Caltrain, and three below ground, at the Moscone Center, Union Square and Washington Street in Chinatown.

The Civil Grand Jury also said it believes Muni "could design a better system to more fully address transit needs along the Chinatown/Financial District corridor," stating the existing design is too Chinatown-centric, lacks important connections to Geary and Market streets, and could benefit more San Franciscans.

Gerald Cauthen, a retired engineer who's now a transit activist with the organization SaveMuni, said an above-ground transportation solution could be designed for Stockton Street that would serve more riders — by configuring dedicated bus lanes as Muni did for Market Street, for example. He added that bus service could be strategically increased on crowded Muni lines in the area to make up for the fact that an articulated bus seats about 54 people compared to 60 per light rail train car. This solution could cost tens of millions of dollars, he said, "a pittance compared to the subway."

Additionally an above-ground solution could provide Chinatown with relief from its overcrowded buses sooner, rather than seven years down the line.

And it wouldn't displace any of Chinatown's residents — at least one building will be torn down for the Central Subway, causing 18 tenants to lose their homes and the city to shoulder their relocation costs.

While at least 88 percent of the subway's \$1.58 billion price tag will be covered by federal and state funding, the subway will cost Muni more than \$15 million per year to run, according to a report the agency provided to the Federal Transit Administration.

At minimum, San Francisco is paying \$124 million for the subway's construction. The money comes from Proposition K, a 30-year half-cent sales tax, approved in 2003 to benefit the city's transportation projects. The city might need to pay more, however, if part of its state funding is cut. In March 2012, Muni authorized itself to obtain an additional \$61 million in bonds to cover a possible shortfall from the state. Despite these costs, San Francisco is getting a deal on the subway's construction. But down the road, maintaining another light rail line could sink Muni further into its perpetual deficit.

Muni's current deficit is about \$29 million, and the agency has turned to management layoffs to try to close the gap.

In a policy paper titled, "It's time to rethink the Central Subway," City Attorney Dennis Herrera estimated in fall 2011 that the subway would add \$62 million to Muni's operating deficit by 2021.

So far, though, it's U.S. taxpayers at large footing the bill for the Central Subway, with grants from the Federal Transportation Administration "New Starts" funds, and earmarks by U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi and senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein.

Even with a billion dollars in federal money, the Central Subway is likely to cost San Francisco many times what it has saved by maintaining bus routes alone and creating the Embarcadero Boulevard.

PART TWO: The Peaceful City Planning No One Knew About

If the San Francisco Civil Grand Jury could state so conclusively that the Central Subway project was “too much money for too little benefit” in its July 2011 report, why did the project proceed with such alacrity?

One of the answers is that few knew about it because the \$1.58 billion Central Subway project was folded into the much larger — but less expensive — \$667 million Third Street project to build a light rail line along the entire eastern edge of the city. The Third Street project was completed in January 2007. Major construction began on the Central Subway project in December 2011.

The seeds for a subway were sown with the demise of the Embarcadero Freeway in 1991, but they were watered by the initial planning of the Third Street Light Rail project, completed in 1995.

Following the Loma Prieta earthquake’s damage to the city’s freeways and Transbay Terminal in 1989, San Francisco began planning to rebuild and improve its transit network (and de-emphasize automobile use) based on the 1914 “four corridor” plan: linking Geary, Van Ness, Third Street and North Beach via public transportation.

Muni determined the Third Street corridor was the most in need of investment. By 1995, the agency began planning to construct the Third Street light rail or “T-Third” line from the Embarcadero, through Bayview-Hunters Point, and out to the Visitacion Valley — linking communities across the entire length of the city that lacked adequate public transportation.

But during the public process for the Third Street corridor, Chinatown residents brought their own transportation concerns to the table. Eventually, pressure from Chinatown and Visitacion Valley community leaders shifted

the proposed project into one that would benefit their communities as well.

Since the city tore down the earthquake-ruined Embarcadero Freeway — which had served the Chinatown-area — in 1991, Chinatown merchants began campaigning for a subway to restore transportation to and from the district.

At public meetings to find an appropriate plan for the Third Street corridor, Chinatown residents and their relatives in a satellite community in Visitacion Valley presented the idea of constructing a subway to connect the Third Street line straight to Chinatown.

The idea resulted in Muni re-configuring the North Beach segment of the “four corridor” plan from a solution for the entire area from North Beach to Market Street into one that would primarily serve Chinatown instead.

This deviated not only from the four corridor plan but also San Francisco’s General Plan for the Chinatown area. Although any transportation solution between North Beach and downtown would ostensibly benefit nearby Chinatown, explicitly expanding public transportation within Chinatown was never mentioned in the general plan for the district. Instead, the general plan focuses on making pedestrian pathways safer. The only mention of public transit is a goal to have signs in both Chinese and English.

The diversion from the original North Beach plan became a solution to create better transportation between Chinatown and the Visitacion Valley, according to the Transportation Research Board report “Community and Systems Planning for Muni’s Third Street Light Rail Project.”

Gen Fujioka, policy manager of the Chinatown Community Development Center, the main non-profit to obtain grants to create community awareness about the Central Subway project, said that an easier commute between Chinatown and Visitacion Valley was important because more Chinatown residents now work outside of the district and need to commute to jobs in the

Bayshore area. Muni defends the plan by saying Chinatown is “the most densely populated area of the country not currently served by modern rail transportation.”

With strong support from Chinatown residents for the subway, it quickly became impractical for Muni to finalize the Third Street line without a solution for the Chinatown community. Because the light rail line would replace the 15 bus route from Chinatown to the Visitacion Valley, advocates argued that it would be too difficult to commute between the two destinations without building the Central Subway extension.

Currently, without the Central Subway, Chinatown residents get to the Third Street line by taking the 30-Stockton or 45-Union-Stockton bus routes to 4th and King streets, where the Central Subway will connect in the future.

In 2007, Muni estimated that the 30-Stockton bus route had average 22,124 daily boardings, making it the sixth-most ridden of Muni’s 60-plus bus lines. (The most-ridden bus line was the 38-Geary, with 33,003 average daily boardings. The 14-Mission came in a relatively-close second place with 32,849 boardings.)

The 45-Union-Stockton had 12,086 average daily boardings, putting it at the upper-middle of Muni’s bus ridership.

As a result of the Third Street planning process, in 1998 Muni proposed a 5.1 mile above-ground light rail line for the Third Street corridor, coupled with a short, underground extension to Chinatown, dubbed “the Central Subway.” The Third Street line would be phase one, and the Chinatown extension would complete the project as phase two.

“The project was conceived and developed by the people of San Francisco,” said Muni’s public relations officer Paul Rose.

Critics — including SaveMuni and former city supervisor Aaron Peskin —

suggest Willie Brown, before and after vying to become mayor in 1996, also offered the dual-project aggressive support in exchange for votes from the Chinatown community.

San Francisco voters first had their opportunity to support or oppose the Central Subway when Proposition K hit the ballot in 2003. Under its “Countywide Transportation Plan,” a half-cent sales tax, money raised over 30 years would go toward the seven transit projects, including rebuilding Doyle Drive and Caltrain’s Transbay Terminal extension.

Prop. K, the “Sales Tax for Transportation,” called for tax dollars to go toward “construction of a Central Subway connecting Chinatown, Union Square, PacBell Park, Bayview/Hunters Point and Visitacion Valley.” It effectively roped together both the Third Street Light Rail project and the Central Subway as a single project. None of the arguments against Prop. K in the voter’s pamphlet mentioned the Central Subway project specifically.

The legal text of Prop. K did list the Third Street light rail and Central Subway projects with separate budget estimates. It estimated that the Central Subway project would cost \$647 million — a relatively modest price for an urban light rail project. (The proposition also grossly underestimated the cost of the Third Street Light Rail project at only \$100 million. By 2006, the T-Third made headlines for being a year behind schedule and over-budget with a total cost of \$667 million.)

Voters handily approved Prop. K by 75 percent, and with it — perhaps unknowingly for many — gave the first official nod of approval for the Central Subway. The same month that Prop. K won, Muni applied for federal funding for the Central Subway. In a description of the project they provided to the Federal Transit Administration’s “New Starts” program, they estimated the subway would cost \$763.9 million — \$116.9 million more than the voters of San Francisco were informed the project would cost.

As the federal funding application process proceeded, most news of the

Central Subway disappeared, other than occasional reports of its swelling cost. The Third Street Light Rail project's construction — also ballooning in price — hogged the spotlight until its completion in 2007. Little progress was made on the Central Subway until January 2009, when the multinational engineering firm AECOM — which is represented by former mayor Willie L. Brown, Jr.'s law firm — won a \$147 million contract to manage the project in a joint venture with EPC Consultants. (The firm originally bid \$156 million, and another firm, Parsons and Hatch Mott MacDonald bid \$137 million, but Muni decided to negotiate with AECOM and EPC, reporting that its bid was superior.)

Because Chinatown and Visitacion Valley residents successfully negotiated with Muni to get the two communities connected by light rail, a 2003 Transportation Research Board report hailed Muni's Central Subway as successful community transportation planning. It stated, "a project which could have dissolved into bickering and divisiveness is instead on track..."

Muni says now that it held hundreds of community meetings about the subway over the past two decades, including one that had some 200 residents in attendance. But those meetings were dominated by community groups like the Chinatown Community Development Center actively advocating for a subway for Chinatown, not the broader community.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported in 2011 that it found city documents showing the Chinatown Community Development Center had been paid \$25,000 by the city to hold a single community meeting about the subway.

The city paid the center \$78,000 overall, the Chronicle reported, to also keep an office open in the community providing information on the subway for six months. The story prompted then-mayoral candidate Leland Yee to stage his own protest in front of City Hall against wasteful spending. (The center is also being paid to relocate 18 tenants displaced by the subway's construction.)

Following the article, the Chinatown Community Development Center issued a public response stating its contracts with the city involved many more hours of community outreach work than The Chronicle reported.

The nonprofit center, which advocates for increased public transportation in Chinatown and provides low income housing throughout the city, also defended its contracts by saying it's the best organization to convey information and find appropriate rehousing for Chinatown residents. And it casts critics of the subway as jealous. "There are those who are unhappy they didn't get the Central Subway built closer to them, and they are the ones still making noise now," said Gen Fujioka, the organization's policy manager.

When the Central Subway finally took center stage in 2011, during the mayoral election, its reception was anything but harmonious. By then, the cost of the subway had swollen to its current \$1.58 billion price tag.

That January, the issue came to the attention of the San Francisco Civil Grand Jury, a 19-member volunteer body that monitors county agencies and chooses seven to 10 topics annually to investigate and produce policy reports on. In July, the grand jury issued a damning report on the subway, stating it is fiscally irresponsible, doesn't benefit enough residents, and that its current design should be scrapped.

Part of the San Francisco Civil Grand Jury's criticism of the subway is that it primarily benefits Chinatown, rather than the broader transportation corridor from North Beach to Market that was part of the original four corridors plan. Another critique: the subway may already be placing a strain on Muni's budget, even with major federal funding for the project.

City Attorney Dennis Herrera, a mayoral candidate, and former supervisor turned Democratic County Central Committee Chair Aaron Peskin — who both previously supported the subway — turned against it, echoing the grand jury's sentiments. Their primary concern is that paying for the subway's

future maintenance will hurt Muni's ability to support its other bus and light rail lines across the city.

This recent criticism, however, has lacked the authority necessary to affect the project. Despite the strongly worded Civil Grand Jury report and some bad press around the 2011 elections, the Central Subway project proceeded into major construction that December. The official ground breaking ceremony for the subway was in Feb. 2010, but the real work started in Dec. 2011 — preparation for tunneling at Union Square.

PART THREE: Irresistible Federal Dollars Beckon Fiscal Irresponsibility

A key force behind the Central Subway project is that most of its funding comes not from the city, but from the federal government and those dollars have proven impossible to resist, say critics.

One such critic is former supervisor Aaron Peskin, who says he regrets his own role in offering early support to the project. He had "reservations" about the subway from the start, he said, calling it poorly designed, but said he succumbed to political pressure to support it. It wasn't a big issue back then, he said, since the federal government had transportation money to spend — lots of it.

Peskin said when he first entered office in 2001, the federal government handed San Francisco \$12 million just for minimal transit projects, like paving streets.

Alongside mayors Willie Brown and Gavin Newsom, he lent his support to the Central Subway project from its public debut in 2003 until 2011, when the project began to garner major criticism during the election season.

After the July 2011 Civil Grand Jury report denounced the subway, Peskin

reversed his opinion and stated his opposition to the ongoing project. “It’s a boondoggle,” he said of the Central Subway recently as the retiring chair of the Democratic County Central Committee. “It’s going to be one of the biggest publicly funded transportation mistakes.”

“The gravy days are over,” Peskin added, citing Wall Street’s crash in 2008 as the turning point.

Although Muni expects the federal government to pay for most of the construction costs of the Central Subway, SaveMuni, the San Francisco Civil Grand Jury and Peskin believe Muni will be unable to sustain the new subway. That will mean a city-wide decline in public transportation.

Watching the anticipated cost of the Central Subway grow from \$647 million to more than a billion dollars was one of the last straws for Peskin. He’s also disturbed by how the 2007 completion of the Third Street light rail, also known as the T-line, has affected Muni.

“Up until a few years ago, you could walk out this door and take the 15 [Muni bus] all the way out to the Bayview,” he said, sitting at Caffè Trieste on Vallejo Street at Grant Ave. “But because of the T-line sucking up money, it was reallocated from the 15 so there wouldn’t be redundant service.”

That reallocation has actually made the trip between North Beach and the Bayview take longer, he said. Without the 15, commuters can take a longer, winding ride on the 8X-Bayshore Express or 9-San Bruno routes, or do a two-step, climbing on the overcrowded 30-Stockton or 45-Union-Stockton and then transferring to the T-line. He expects the cost of running the Central Subway will have a similar, ironically negative, impact on public transit. “They say Chinatown is very congested, and this service will only take seven minutes to get to Caltrain,” he said. But considering the time it will take to transfer to Caltrain or the Third Street Muni line, Peskin said waiting to take such a short subway may often take longer than riding the

Muni buses currently traveling between the destinations.

If he believed the design was so poor, why did he support the subway in the first place? “In the past, I would have hoped the subway would have expanded underground everywhere,” he said, creating a network across San Francisco. In fact, this idea is similar to Muni’s original plan according to a 2002 report: for the “Central Subway” tunnel to become the center of a circuit of light rail routes — some below and some above ground — to replace the agency’s heaviest-used bus lines; to North Beach, up Geary, down Van Ness to Daly City, and more. But with fewer funding options for a Muni already in the red, “the reality is, there’s not going to be a Central Subway part three,” said Peskin, alluding to the extension into North Beach.

From the start, documents show the hope of big-time federal funding drove the Central Subway project — but also delayed it and drove up its cost. When it was initially proposed in the late 1990s, some politicians initially wanted Muni to use \$900 million in local sales tax funds to build both the Third Street and Chinatown rail lines immediately, according to a 2003 Transportation Research Board report. But Muni and the San Francisco County Transportation Authority wanted to wait for matching federal funds to pay for most of the project.

So far, at least half of \$200 million Muni spent on the Central Subway’s initial design and construction, through 2011, was federal money. Over the next two years, Muni plans to spend at least \$447 million on the subway’s construction, largely state and federal dollars. Muni only allocated \$124 million of local funds from Prop. K to the project. (Depending on state budget cuts, Muni may be on the hook for another \$61 million, bringing the city’s total obligation to \$185 million.)

But gaining 100 percent of the federal matching money has been long in coming. Nearly a decade after officially launching the project, thanks to a slow bureaucratic process and limits on how much federal funding can be delivered to a single metropolitan-area at once, Muni is still waiting for final

approval from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) money for the funds to complete the project. In the meantime, Muni's estimated cost for the Central Subway project has increased by almost a billion dollars. Still, because the "New Starts" program aims to provide enough matching funds to complete a project, most of the cost increase will be covered by federal funding.

Because of its rising cost, Muni commissioned a memo on alternatives to the subway in 2006 — at that point, the cost was \$1.4 billion. In the memo, Thomas Matoff, the director of planning at LTK Engineering Services and a former Muni planning director, wrote that investment in a transit system "should represent either an opportunity to reduce operating expenses, or represent the most efficient way of bringing better service to additional markets."

"As proposed, this project does not appear to do that — it promises to combine high capital costs with higher operating costs," he wrote.

But Matoff's technical suggestions to improve the subway were rejected because, at that point, altering its design would "jeopardize federal funding commitments for the City of San Francisco," Muni responded in the 2006 memo.

Muni expected to get the final OK from the Federal Transportation Administration in late 2011, but as of May 2012 Muni was still waiting. Construction of the project began in early 2012 after Muni was reassured by the FTA that it's likely to get its full-funding agreement.

San Francisco's most famous politicians have been eager to do their part to secure federal dollars to pay for the subway. Everyone — from former mayor Willie Brown, senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer to U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi, former mayor Gavin Newsom and now Mayor Ed Lee — has pressed for the money.

The rationale given is that federal government investment in the major capital project is creating construction jobs, and will lessen traffic congestion and be more environmentally-friendly. “By increasing transportation options between the vibrant heart of Chinatown and the economic engine of downtown, the Central Subway project will promote commerce, improve mobility and reduce air pollution for all of San Francisco,” said Rep. Pelosi in a statement upon securing \$6 million for the Central Subway in 2010.

Willie Brown’s administration started to campaign for federal funding for the Central Subway project in 2003, just before he left office. It’s been widely reported in the media that Brown gained support for his mayoral campaign in 1995 from the Chinatown community after its power-broker Rose Pak, a consultant for the San Francisco Chinese Chamber of Commerce, persuaded him to support the district getting its own subway. Pak has been coy about confirming the rumor.

Pak did not respond to requests for comment for this article.

Since then, The New York Times reported that AECOM, the engineering contractor managing the subway project, is represented by Brown’s law firm, Willie L. Brown, Jr., Attorney at Law. AECOM won a \$147 million contract to manage the project in 2009.

AECOM is also a donating member of the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR), a major advocacy group that has issued several reports in support of the Central Subway project.

After Brown left office, his successor Gavin Newsom eagerly took up the banner for the subway, as has newly-elected Mayor Ed Lee — who had tremendous support from the Chinatown community, and both Pak and Brown. In early 2007, Newsom, then-supervisor Aaron Peskin and Muni CEO Nat Ford issued a statement in support of the project. “As we move

forward with the Central Subway project, it is vital that we have the support and leadership of the community to prevent any delays and ensure that we receive all of our federal funding,” said Newsom.

In his 2010 State of the City address, Newsom declared of the subway, “what a big victory.”

“We’re just a year or so away of drawing down \$1 billion by getting the full funding grant agreement from the federal government to build that 1.7-mile extension, that Phase Two of the original light rail system, that \$658 million project, all the way out into Chinatown,” he said. “This was a significant thing.”

U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi and senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein have played a combined role in securing at least \$50 million for the Central Subway, with an earmark attached to the Transportation and Housing and Urban Development funding bill for the subway in 2008, ’09 and ’10.

Although it’s late in the game, Peskin is still trying to stop the project. “It’s an uphill battle, but it’s not insurmountable,” he said, stating he hopes the government might realize Muni doesn’t have the money to maintain a new subway.

“If we want to improve bus service between Chinatown and Caltrain, we can do that with a bucket of paint,” he said referring to creating a dedicated bus lane, stopping double-parking and adjusting foot traffic at intersections to lessen delays.

Both Chinatown’s Community Development Center and Muni defend the project’s most expensive feature, drilling beneath downtown San Francisco, as an attempt to relieve traffic congestion along Stockton Street. However, Muni states it has no plans to permanently change or reduce any of the frequent Chinatown-area bus routes, the 30, 45 and 8x lines, because of the project. The subway is in addition, according to Muni spokesperson Paul

Rose.

The fact that Muni isn't planning to trim bus service along the Central Subway route was a bad sign to Muni consultant Matoff. In his 2006 memo, he said the subway "retains paralleling express buses because it does not, apparently, effectively meet the market needs in the corridor it is intended to serve."

But even in 2006, Matoff's arguments against the subway were too late. Now, Muni has already doled out eight construction contracts between Dec. 2008 and June 2011, worth about \$500 million total. And with construction beginning and a final funding approval from the FTA finally around the corner, the light rail line is unlikely to be stopped.

PART FOUR: Protests Continue, But the Train Has Left the Station

Although it's faced harsh criticism even from its former supporters, construction of the 1.7 mile, \$1.58 billion Central Subway plowed ahead during the height of the Christmas season, with a noisy, dusty kickoff in the most conspicuous spot — Union Square.

In a sense, the subway's progress speaks to the rise of San Francisco's Asian American voting bloc.

Chinatown has been on the rise since 1977, when the Chinatown Community Development Center formed and began organizing community members to advocate in their best property and transportation interests. Community members protested the demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway, which served as their connection to the rest of the Bay Area, after it was damaged by the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989. They lost. But after two decades of organizing and planning, they've won the battle to replace the long-gone freeway with the Central Subway — even if the solution may not live up to their expectations.

During the 2011 election season, mayoral candidate Dennis Herrera and Democratic County Central Committee Chair Aaron Peskin came out against the subway project, saying it was too expensive and would not substantially improve public transit in the downtown area — in fact, it could make it worse by overburdening Muni.

For denouncing the project, Herrera and Peskin earned the ire of the Chinatown business community. The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, a powerful century-and-a-half old political organization led by Chinatown's wealthiest business leaders, held a press conference in Sept. 2011 to blast both politicians, assuring them they'd lost the community's vote.

Come November, Edwin Lee, the Chinatown favorite and Central Subway supporter, won the election by more than 22,000 votes and 30.7 percent of the vote. Supervisor John Avalos came second with 19 percent of the vote, and Herrera trailed in third with 11 percent.

The growing political power of the Chinatown community was a key factor in the election, and the progress of the Central Subway. Asian-Americans now make up 35 percent of San Francisco's population of 805,235. Within the past decade, the number of registered voters in Chinatown has increased by 84 percent.

In the 2011 municipal election, 8,941 ballots were cast from the Chinatown neighborhood, 42 percent of the district's 21,486 registered voters. Out of San Francisco's 26 neighborhoods, Chinatown residents accounted for an above-average 4.5 percent of all ballots cast.

Back in 2001, only 15 percent of Chinatown's 17,945 registered voters cast a ballot in a municipal election. That's a 27 percent increase in votes from Chinatown in ten years.

Critics, including Peskin, say former Mayor Willie Brown used the Chinatown community's support to get elected back in 1996 by promising to support the Central Subway. Since leaving office in 2004, Brown has maintained a public friendship with Rose Pak, Chinatown's most high profile consultant and advocate, whom he occasionally compliments in his San Francisco Chronicle column, "Willie's World."

Pak did not respond to requests for comment for this article.

Between the Chinatown Community Development Center, the district's nonprofit housing and transportation advocacy organization that has been a key force behind the subway planning process, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, which claims the subway is important for business, and consultant Pak, Chinatown now has a lot of weight to throw around.

Some of the Chinatown Community Development Center's brightest stars have moved on to important positions in city government. When he was a civil rights lawyer, Mayor Lee worked alongside many of the center's staff members. City supervisor David Chiu and Assessor Phil Ting were once a president and member of the center's board, respectively. Most recently, Cindy Wu, the center's former community planning manager, was appointed as a San Francisco city planning commissioner.

Chinatown's growing influence has managed to get San Francisco political powers to push forward a project that is massive in cost, short in physical length, and will take at least seven more years to build — for benefits that are still widely debated.

The San Francisco Civil Grand Jury chose to investigate the project in 2011 and released a report that July stating the project was "too much money for too little benefit," and criticized its design for being too oriented around Chinatown instead of the broader downtown to North Beach area. The report earned the subway its first real flurry of media attention. (The Civil Grand Jury has been critiqued for being overwhelmingly made up of wealthy

white residents who can participate in grand jury activities because they do not need to work.)

Since the grand jury report, media reports across the country have been critical of San Francisco's subway project. In Aug. 2011, the Wall Street Journal wrote a biting editorial against the project that compelled Federal Transit Administrator Peter M. Rogoff to defend the agency's support for the subway, stating that projects like it "[create] jobs not just through new construction, but through the economic development that occurs along the new transit corridors."

San Francisco's most well-known politicians, from senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer to U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi have jumped on that bandwagon and then some. They've brought some \$50 million in federal funding to the Central Subway project within the past four years, citing that it will bring jobs, help the environment and improve transportation in the Chinatown community.

The Washington Post ran an investigation of federal earmarks used to fund projects that are close to the supporting legislators' properties and businesses in Feb. 2012. The Post cited U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi for her fundraising for the Central Subway, because her husband, Paul Pelosi, owns an office building about six blocks away from the subway's new Union Square station. In response to the Post, Pelosi's office noted how small San Francisco is, and said the project would solve traffic congestion problems.

So far, the transit justice angle of the Central Subway project — to relieve overcrowded buses in the most densely populated neighborhood of San Francisco — along with the endorsement of San Francisco's biggest politicians, has won the debate with Federal Transit Administration. It's promised Muni almost a billion dollars in funding for the subway project.

The 30-Stockton, the primary bus used to navigate through Chinatown, had an average of 22,124 boardings per day in 2007, according to Muni's Transit

Effectiveness Project report, making it one of San Francisco's top ten busiest routes. Another route in the area, the 45-line, had about 12,000 boardings. Muni hasn't ruled out additionally re-arranging Stockton Street traffic or introducing bus rapid transit to the area — solutions that critics of the Central Subway, like Peskin and SaveMuni, say should be implemented instead of the light rail line.

In February, in a last ditch effort to stop the Central Subway, U.S. Representative Tom McClintock drafted an amendment to the Federal Transit Administration bill that would block federal funding for the project. He is planning to introduce it this summer.

As McClintock took a stand against the subway, Mayor Lee declared in a press release, “The Central Subway Project will create jobs, improve local and regional transit options and reduce congestion in one of the busiest areas of the city.”

“We are grateful for the support of our federal partners and look forward to more good news from Washington,” he said in the statement released in February, referring to the much-delayed but relatively-assured Federal Transit Administration funding approval.

Despite the project's accelerating progress in the last 12 months, SaveMuni members still think the project can be stopped — just like the rebuilding of the Embarcadero Freeway was halted two decades ago.

Member Howard Wong enthusiastically emails the group's listserv announcing every article or public objection to the project. He and former engineer Gerald Cauthen held a press conference in May 2012 to thrash the project again, the occasion being Muni's announcement that it may need \$61 million in bonds to cover a funding shortfall from the state.

Wong and Cauthen believe that opponents could still convince the powers that be, in this case the Federal Transportation Administration, to step on the

brakes and not approve the final funding for the project. But after the FTA has sent Muni repeated letters of commitment to the project, and with construction launched at Union Square, a swift end to the Central Subway saga is nowhere in sight.

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