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## The visionary driving SF's transit future

By JONAH OWEN LAMB

**SAN FRANCISCO** – From her 19th-story office on Mission Street, Maria Ayerdi-Kaplan can look down upon the birthing of what will be the central transit hub of San Francisco and Northern California. But right now, it's still just a giant hole in the ground.

When the 48-year-old former lawyer first moved into her office a decade ago as the head of the then-newly created Transbay Joint Powers Authority, the view was not of a construction site but rather the Depression-era behemoth bus station at First and Mission streets that would be turned to rubble starting in 2010.

Ayerdi-Kaplan kept faith in her vision by imagining what was to come: the four-block-long Transbay Transit Center, a "Grand Central of the West."

"I was selling a dream," she said of the project. "They just didn't think it would happen."

That dream, studied and talked about since the administration of Mayor Joseph Alioto in the late 1960s, was a modern transit terminal linking the region on the site of the 1939 bus station. But it would be more than just a place to catch a ride out of town. It would be what Ayerdi-Kaplan and others have dubbed San Francisco's version of the famous New York City transit hub, replete with a park, dining and entertainment space on top of the structure; retail and dining on the ground and second floors; a bus deck on the third floor; trains underground; and a standout design that will make the structure recognizable worldwide.



*Maria Ayerdi-Kaplan helms the Transbay Joint Powers Authority, which is building the future transit center.*

"No matter how stormy the weather, you stay the course," Ayerdi-Kaplan said of her time working on the project.

For more than a dozen years, Ayerdi-Kaplan has been the constant force pushing, cajoling, negotiating and fundraising to make The City's largest public-works project in recent memory a reality. She has made her way as the central player in the project, from her time as then-Mayor Willie Brown's transportation policy adviser, when the project was an idea, to the head of an independent agency in charge of the very real, \$4.5 billion undertaking.

"Maria, she is the force behind this," said TJPA board member Gabriel Metcalf. "There have been a lot of people who have played important roles—including voters and a succession of mayors and su-

pervisors—but the champion and leader has been Maria."

Metcalf is head of the urban think tank SPUR and the authority's board representative for Mayor Ed Lee. He said the Transbay Transit Center is a unique project that would have died on the vine years ago without the sustained force that is Ayerdi-Kaplan.

But the storms Ayerdi-Kaplan has weathered show no signs of abating.

With the state's high-speed rail venture slowed by court battles—it's planned to eventually link with the Transbay Transit Center through the modernization of Caltrain tracks—and funding for the transit center's \$2.7 billion second phase uncertain, questions have been raised, questions about what exactly is being built.

Quentin Kopp, a former San Francisco judge and supervisor who once headed the state high-speed rail board, called the transit center project a boondoggle that will never be anything but a bus stop with a concrete box for trains that will never come.

His main issue—he remains a supporter of high-speed rail—is with the current plan, which will create a blended rail network with Caltrain instead of a truly high-speed system. For that to happen, Caltrain would need to be extended from its terminus at Fourth and King streets

"This terminal is a fantasy," said Kopp, who doesn't believe high-speed rail will come to fruition or that funding for the transit center's second phase will materialize.

### Gutsy Request at City Hall

The oldest of six children born in Bogota, Colombia, Ayerdi-Kaplan moved to

San Francisco as a kid, attended Mission High School and eventually graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in law.

After college, as a single mother (her daughter is now 30), Ayerdi-Kaplan used her law degree to get a job at UPS, where she worked from 1992 to 1998.

Her career in San Francisco and government started with the Brown administration in 1998.

The story goes that Ayerdi-Kaplan walked into Brown's office at a time when the general public is given an audience and asked him for a job. To her surprise, he said yes.

"She was a favored person under former Mayor Willie Brown as well as city [administrator] Steve Kawa," said lawyer and planning watcher Sue Hestor. "She has done very well for herself." Kawa, an influential and longtime city administrator, is Mayor Ed Lee's chief of staff. He also held that position for Lee's predecessor, Gavin Newsom, and was Brown's deputy chief of staff.

Ayerdi-Kaplan first started working on the Transbay Transit Center project for Brown as his adviser for transportation policy. She was immediately confronted with a scenario of bickering government agencies and bodies at odds over what to do, she said.



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Transbay Terminal Construction



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"When I say 'we,' I, working with our counsel, drafted the legislation, the memos of agreements," she said of the 2001 city law and subsequent agreements.

Former state Sen. John Burton told The San Francisco Examiner that Ayerdi-Kaplan was instrumental in the early years.

"For years, I have worked to make the transit center a reality," he said. "Under Maria's leadership, we went from this project being a 30-plus-years idea to a station under construction in the space of a decade."

By 2003, Ayerdi-Kaplan had left city government and solely worked for the TJPA. She had been leading the authority since 2001.

As an at-will employee, which means she can be fired without cause, she makes about \$230,000 a year and is overseen by a six-member board that includes one representative each from the Board of Supervisors, San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, Mayor's Office, the state of California, AC Transit and Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Authority.

When she took the reins, there was no money—the first \$10 million in seed funding came with the help of U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi soon afterward—and Ayerdi-Kaplan said she was a leader without an organization.

In many ways that was the sticking point when it came to getting funds, Ayerdi-Ka-

struction, Ayerdi-Kaplan said.

Still, the state kept the right to take it all back if the project were to fall through. In the deal, and subsequent law, the state has fiduciary oversight of the funds and made it so 35 percent of housing built on the land would be sold at below-market rate.

This step, along with the density and height changes that were part of the special transit district created around the site, were the key to getting the project going and for its future funding, Ayerdi-Kaplan said.

### 'Heavy-Hitting Players'

After keeping the project alive during the Great Recession, Ayerdi-Kaplan recently walked through the completed excavation with The Examiner, marking the January day that the last dirt was taken from the ground.

Projected to open in 2017, the Transbay Transit Center's excavation completion set the stage for pouring the first concrete slabs of the project.

Ayerdi-Kaplan makes sure to credit all the allies she has had over the years, from state and federal lawmakers to local leaders.

And keeping in touch with those allies is still very much what she does. She was recently in Sacramento briefing local state Sen. Mark Leno and Gov. Jerry Brown's staff on the status of the project.

It's no surprise she takes such care to keep her relationships with politicians alive and well (recently she briefed U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer at her Palm Springs home over lunch, Ayerdi-Kaplan said). It is with their help that huge amounts of money have flowed into the project, she said.

"She was kind of the most instrumental person behind a lot or most of the early dealings," said Chris Daly, who was supervisor of the area when the project broke ground. "There were heavy-hitting players backing up Maria. ... She had their ear and had their attention."

Despite setbacks, most recently the ongoing legal fight over the future of high-speed rail, Ayerdi-Kaplan believes there is no turning back.

She brushes aside critics like former high-speed rail board chief Kopp, who is skeptical of the rail system, let alone a Caltrain extension from Fourth and King streets, ever becoming a reality.

First off, Ayerdi-Kaplan sees no reason why people taking buses don't deserve as much as anyone else.

"When I hear people say, 'We don't want a bus-only facility,' I bristle a little, because people who take buses are entitled to have a safe and efficient facility," she said.

But the Transbay Transit Center's very existence, Ayerdi-Kaplan insists, will pressure politicians to make it so the rail connection comes.

"When that station opens, I think the momentum will really take off," she said. "It's crying out for the trains to come."

It's a matter of political will, she said, and it's a political will she believes local and state leaders have.

"Sooner or later, it's a matter of when, not if, it will ever happen," she said of high-speed rail and Caltrain. "I believe that if you build it, it will come."



*Transbay Terminal Construction*

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