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Saving the Main Post

By Martin Beresford

San Francisco is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and the Presidio, with its wonderful forests, trails, open spaces, historical architecture and spectacular views, is surely one of our City's greatest treasures.

Since the Army departed in 1994, the central area of the Presidio has been managed by the Presidio Trust (a federally chartered non-profit organization, whose directors are federal appointees) while the coastal sections – including Crissy Field and the Coastal Bluffs - are managed by the National Park Service. Both organizations have done a wonderful job in restoring the Presidio's natural and architectural beauty. Financially, the Trust is well on the way to achieve its federally mandated goal of becoming self supporting - based largely on rental income from residential and commercial properties. This year's budget projects an operating surplus around \$8mn, though the cash flows needed to finance ongoing and discretionary capital improvements are still partly dependent on federal appropriations, which will end in 2013.

Public/private partnerships - including private donations from wealthy philanthropists - have been key factors in the Presidio's success. The brilliantly successful restoration of Crissy Field, for example, and recent expansions of the park's beautiful trails, bike paths and overlooks, were largely funded by foundations from the Haas family, doyens of jeans maker Levi Strauss & Co.

Perhaps coincidentally, the latest philanthropic proposal comes from another family whose wealth, like that of the Haas family, originated in the jeans business. Don and Doris Fisher, founders of the GAP, have offered to donate their collection of contemporary art, and to fund a huge, modernistic museum to house the collection at the Main Post, the heart of the Presidio. The Fishers' generosity – together with their past contributions to the Presidio's development - are wonderful and much appreciated. However, the controversial location and architecture of the proposed museum have raised three major concerns:

First, many people have questioned whether such a museum truly belongs in the Presidio - whose primary mission is "preserving, enhancing and maintaining the Presidio as a park". Many have suggested alternative locations within the City, where the public benefit might be more consistent with the museum's stated goal of "educating the public in contemporary art". Some have questioned, perhaps a little churlishly, whether the Fisher collection – said to consist largely of minimalists and abstractionists such as Serra and Calder, plus pop artists like Lichtenstein and Warhol – is sufficiently "world class" to merit such a prime location; but that, of course, is a matter of taste, and few have actually seen more than a small part of the collection.

Assuming for the sake of argument that the proposed museum will eventually be built within the Presidio - a decision that rests ultimately with the Trust – a second, widely expressed concern relates to its proposed design and location. Clearly, any new building must respect and complement the Presidio’s wonderful architectural heritage. But the huge, starkly modern museum, as currently proposed, would completely dominate the Main Post, visually dwarfing the historic barracks and other buildings of architectural and historical interest.

Famous architect Lawrence Halprin, among others, has described the rather ostentatious design as “absurdly inappropriate”, arguing that it would “ruin the unique architectural character of the Presidio”. The proposed museum would also entail demolishing the much-loved Bowling Alley and adjoining tennis court – with no assurance that these popular recreational facilities, currently enjoyed by thousands of local residents, would ever be replaced.

Many people have suggested alternative sites for the museum within the Presidio. The Commissary, with its easy access, excellent parking facilities and spacious interior, would be a prime candidate. This would leave the Main Post available for more appropriate uses such as a local history museum - less disruptive of the Presidio’s natural and architectural resources, and more consistent with the Trust’s primary mission.

A third concern relates to the huge increase in the number of visitors that the planners expect the museum to attract. The resulting burden on public and private transportation could create traffic and parking nightmare, both within the Presidio itself and in surrounding neighborhoods. Wherever the Fisher museum is eventually located, it must ensure adequate parking – preferably underground - to minimize the visual impact and disruption of local parking and traffic. But at this stage, it is not clear how the planners propose to address this need.

The Marina Community Association (MCA) has discussed these concerns with the Trust, and has submitted several suggestions regarding the scope of an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) currently in progress. In particular, MCA has requested detailed projections of the museum’s impact on local traffic and parking, together with plans to minimize disruption to the Marina. Any such plans – which would involve many overlapping jurisdictions - should ideally be coordinated on a holistic basis with other projects that will impact traffic and parking in the Marina, including the upgrading of Doyle Drive, or the planned extension of historic street cars through Fort Mason - and possibly further West along Beach Street, Cervantes and Marina Boulevard. This would require massive, environmentally intrusive investment in terminals, turnarounds, rail lines and overhead power cables through the Marina. MCA has requested that the EIS investigate alternative ways to provide public access to Fort Mason and beyond, such as shuttles, buses or water taxis.

On issues like these – which could drastically impact the quality of life in our neighborhood - MCA’s mission is to represent the interests of the Marina District, working collaboratively with other neighborhood associations plus local, state and federal

authorities. If you would like to become involved and contribute to MCA's activities, or simply to find more information, please visit us at www.sfmca.org.

Martin Beresford is a Director of the Marina Community Association. The views expressed in this article are those of the writer, and not necessarily those of the Association.