

Wrong Track for the Presidio

By Martin Beresford

Time is running out for Marina residents to make their voices heard regarding GAP chairman Don Fisher's proposed Contemporary Art Museum in the Presidio's Main Post. Rising concerns about the potential impact of the museum – discussed in last month's Marina Times - have led to urgent meetings by local neighborhood associations, anxious to preserve the Presidio's natural beauty, historic architecture, and its legal status as a National Historic Landmark, and to avoid potential negative impacts on surrounding neighborhoods.

Why do so many people - who might otherwise have welcomed the loan of a large contemporary art collection - oppose the Fisher museum? First, many doubt whether such a museum truly belongs in the Presidio – whose primary mandate is to preserve, enhance and maintain the Presidio as a park. Many believe alternative locations within the City could provide far greater public benefit, and a more cost-effective way to achieve the Fishers' praiseworthy goal of “educating the public in contemporary art”.

Second, if the museum were to be located within the Presidio, many feel it should be in some other location away from the Main Post, less disruptive of the Presidio's natural beauty and historical heritage. The proposed 100,000 sq. ft. museum – a modernistic building variously described as “a huge, shiny white box”, “intrusive and ostentatious” and “absurdly inappropriate” – is clearly incongruous with the Main Post's unique architectural character. It thus violates the Trust's mandate to ensure that any new building must “reinforce the historic framework and layout of the Main Post” and that its “scale, massing, height, materials and color must be compatible with the character of adjacent buildings”. Together with other planned developments at the Main Post – including a new 80,000 sq. ft. lodge, expansion of the Presidio Theater and destruction of existing roads, buildings and sports facilities - the museum as proposed appears to violate the Interior Department's standards and the Trust's own Planning Guidelines – endangering the Presidio's status as an historic district.

Third, there is widespread concern that little thought appears to have been given to the potentially drastic impact of the museum on parking and transportation, both within the Presidio and in the surrounding neighborhoods – a particularly important concern for the Marina district, with its already congested streets and chronic lack of parking space.

The Marina Community Association (MCA) has expressed opposition to the Fisher museum - at least in its currently proposed design and location - in a series of letters and discussions with the Presidio Trust. We urge the Trust to refrain from constructing the proposed museum - or any other large scale building - at the head of the Main Post, and to reduce the overall amount of new construction there. We urge the Trust to locate the museum – if it is to be in the Presidio - in a more appropriate location, to reduce its unduly dominating scale, and to ensure that designs for the museum, the lodge and any other new buildings are compatible with the unique character of the Presidio, in line with the Trust's mandate.

Another, closely related issue for the Marina district is the National Park Service's plan to extend the historic streetcar track from Fisherman's Wharf through the Fort Mason tunnel - and potentially further West, through the Marina to the Presidio. MCA has expressed major concerns about this plan, including the use of technically obsolete historic streetcars, which cannot be driven backwards; this means they must be turned around in a loop or by other means - inevitably causing disruption in and around Fort Mason and Marina Boulevard. Original plans included a loop of rail tracks and overhead cables crossing and re-crossing Marina Boulevard by the Marina Safeway. An alternative plan calls for cutting away the grass hillside on the east side of Laguna Street, between Marina Boulevard and Bay Street, to accommodate a loop or "Y" turn. The grassy meadow - currently enjoyed by thousands of residents and visitors - would be replaced with a twenty foot high retaining wall. The MCA opposes both these plans, and urges the Park Service to consider alternative ways to transport people from Fisherman's Wharf to Fort Mason (and potentially beyond) - less disruptive and more cost effective than the estimated \$50 million required for the current plan.

The Presidio Trust has done a wonderful job in managing the Presidio since it was handed over by the military in 1994. Regarding the Fisher museum and related Main Post developments, however, the Trust's reaction to questions has been disappointingly unresponsive. Recent meetings with the Trust have yielded few answers - giving an impression that the Trust, while nominally sensitive to public opinion, may actually be planning to go ahead with these projects in their currently proposed form, regardless of the public's legitimate concerns. Accusations that local residents are simply playing "NIMBY" are disproved by equally strong opposition from other, non-local organizations, including the Coalition of San Francisco Neighborhoods - comprising 30 neighborhoods from all over the City - and, most importantly, from the National Park Service, which shares advisory responsibility for monitoring the Trust's compliance with its mandate under the Presidio Programmatic Agreement.

The final decision regarding the Fisher museum rests with the Trust - a federal jurisdiction whose directors are mainly Presidential appointees. The Trust recently informed us that the report of a Supplementary Environmental Impact Study, plus an updated plan for the Main Post, will be released in early June, followed by a public meeting of the Trust's board of directors on June 18th, then a 45 day period for public comment, and a 30 day period for final revisions before the plan is formally approved - possibly as early as September.

The MCA's mission is to represent the interests of the Marina District, working with other neighborhood associations plus local, state and federal authorities. Please let us know your thoughts on these and other issues affecting the quality of life in our neighborhood, at info@sfmca.org and be sure to attend MCA's general meeting on May 21 at the Golden Gate Yacht Club (details at www.sfmca.org). Meanwhile, to make your voice heard, please write to federal and local leaders including Speaker Nancy Pelosi (who played a key role in the establishment of the Presidio Trust) (sf.nancy@mail.house.gov), Senator Feinstein (feinstein.senate.gov), Mayor Newsom (gavin.newsom@sfgov.org) or our local Supervisor Alioto-Pier (michela.alioto-pier@sfgov.org).

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