

News Release

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Historical Association Reacts Cautiously to Presidio Trust's Decision on Museums

The Presidio Historical Association (PHA) reacted cautiously to the Presidio Trust's decision to approve building a contemporary art museum funded by The Gap's founder Donald Fisher in San Francisco's Presidio and to fund a "museum without walls" program to interpret the park's history.

PHA President Gary Widman said that the Trust's announcement failed to assure the public that it will protect the Presidio's National Historic Landmark District in the Main Post, the most valuable of the Presidio's historic park resources. In recent months, the Trust had spoken positively about the 100,000 sq. ft. Fisher museum and an 80,000 sq. ft. hotel to be built on the historic Main Post.

"The public -- the true owners of this historic national park -- must demand that the Presidio Trust announce unequivocally that the art museum will not be built in the Presidio's historic Main Post district, which could destroy the integrity of this site forever," said Widman.

"Our goal has always been to make the Presidio's rich history accessible to visitors," said Widman. Though the Presidio is a National Historic Landmark District, no history museum of any sort has been there since 1997.

"We support the Fisher museum being located within the Presidio, but we are unalterably opposed to its being located on the historic Main Post," Widman said.

Widman believes that the Trust's decision to continue reviewing the design and location of the Fisher museum implicitly reflects the overwhelmingly negative public response to the art museum. Hundreds of bloggers from coast to coast opposed locating the art museum on the Main Post. San Francisco Tomorrow, a group dedicated to the city's future development, questioned the Trust's actions in an article entitled "Can This Trust Be Trusted?", published in its January 2008 newsletter.

“The Trust's Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) must address many issues and should thoroughly, objectively analyze the benefits of other sites suggested by both PHA and the public for the Fisher building,” he said.

Charles A. Fracchia, Founder and President Emeritus of the San Francisco Museum & Historical Society said that “...the [Main Post] should be preserved as it exists...and that contemporary new buildings on the Main Post would be an “intrusion... looked upon in ages to come as eyesores built by the unfeeling and the insensitive.”

Preeminent San Francisco landscape architect Lawrence Halprin had sharply criticized Fisher’s proposal, saying it was “absurdly inappropriate” and would “ruin the unique architectural character of the Presidio.”

PHA’s Proposal For a History Center

PHA had responded to the Presidio Trust’s August 2007 request for alternative proposals with a comprehensive plan for an onsite History Center. With only 90 days to respond and on a shoestring budget, PHA proposed a 50,000 sq. ft. historically sensitive building to educate visitors on American history.

The Trust’s press release, issued on Wednesday, noted that while multimillionaire Donald Fisher would personally fund his art museum, PHA had not identified financing for its history center. But Widman noted that over many years of raising millions of philanthropic dollars for recreational and ecological projects, the Trust itself never had allocated or solicited funds, or authorized others to raise funds, for a history center.

In its proposal for the History Center, PHA had invited the Trust to join in a public/private board of stakeholders including the Trust, National Park Service, local universities, relevant organizations, and private citizens to oversee the center’s fundraising and program development.

In December, PHA submitted a 28-page commentary to the Presidio Trust regarding administrative processes, environmental impacts and historical issues as well as questions over the Trust’s efforts to modify the Main Post’s land use plans and design guidelines.

On January 8, PHA announced that it was seeking “Most Endangered Historic Site” status for San Francisco’s Presidio park. from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Presidio, a military garrison from 1776 to 1994, is designated a National Historic Landmark District, the highest possible designation, by the Secretary of the Interior. Its buildings and setting reflect 220 years of America’s heritage.

PHA Questions Presidio Trust's Proposed History "Museum Without Walls"

The Trust's statement Wednesday that it is committed to establishing a "state-of-the-art history center and program" and that it will work with PHA and others at the Presidio is a long-awaited move. However, Widman said that PHA had major concerns about the Trust's references to a "museum without walls", which apparently requires visitors to use their own cellphones to connect to prerecorded historical messages.

"The Presidio Trust should offer the public a meaningful history center which educates visitors on the full scope, causes and effects, sacrifices and meanings of American history in the west since 1776," Widman said. "PHA supports an outdoor cellphone tour as a belated beginning, but compared to the possibilities of a real museum, educating California's students and thousands of visitors, this cellphone "museum" is unacceptable as a final goal."

"It will take clarity of vision, cooperation with the National Park Service, universities, community groups, knowledgeable and dedicated individuals, as well as a plan to create and fund a world-class history museum in the Presidio," Widman said.

"We are all waiting to see the Trust's next steps," said Widman.

Founded in the 1950s, the nonprofit Presidio Historical Association (PHA) has worked in cooperation with the National Park Service and Presidio Trust since 1994 to advocate for preserving the integrity of the Presidio's National Historic Landmark District, located within the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). PHA created a museum for the Army when it was based at the Presidio. Earlier, PHA helped restore historic Fort Point at the base of the Golden Gate Bridge.

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