

NEWS RELEASE

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History Center at the Golden Gate Proposed For Presidio: Alternatives Raise Concerns

San Francisco's Presidio Historical Association (PHA) is proposing an American history museum for the Main Post of the West's oldest military base, which operated from 1776 through 1994. PHA submitted its plan last Friday in response to the Presidio Trust's request for proposals to compete with a museum of art under consideration.

"The Presidio has played a central role in Western and American history," said Gary Widman, President of PHA. "The Main Post was the site of the original 1776 El Presidio and now has unique buildings from every major era since that time. America's history centered on the Golden Gate is reflected in the Presidio. We believe that the Presidio Trust has a duty to present that history to future generations. Our proposed History Center would help them fulfill that duty." Currently, no history museum is located at the Presidio, a National Park and National Historic Landmark District.

San Francisco businessman Donald Fisher has proposed that a Museum of Contemporary Art be built in the Presidio's historic Main Post. Fisher, founder of The Gap, told the Presidio Trust that he would personally underwrite the museum, where he proposes to display his personal art collection.

“PHA believes that its History Center would present the Presidio’s history and American history to the public,” said Widman. “It can only be located in the Main Post, but an art museum could be located in other, more compatible settings.”

The Presidio encompasses San Francisco’s coastline to the southern tip of the Golden Gate Bridge. Because it was an active military base until 1994, the property remained free of commercial and private development despite its highly desirable location. Today, the Presidio is a National Park and Historic Landmark District, with key areas governed by the Presidio Trust’s Board.

PHA’s proposal envisions a 50,000 sq.-foot Center located on the historic Main Post. A Visitors Center would welcome hundreds of thousands of visitors a year. The Center’s primary mission would be to educate a diverse audience, from K-12 pupils, college students and educators to local residents and international tourists. Gallery pods for other exhibits would radiate from a central atrium, allowing visitors to easily pursue their own interests.

Widman said the concept of a History Center located in the Main Post has the support of community leaders, including Ira Michael Heyman, Chancellor Emeritus of UC Berkeley, Secretary Emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution and a former Presidio Trust Board member; David Kennedy and Richard White, Co-Directors of Stanford University’s Bill Lane Center for the Study of the North American West; Walter Newman, Former President of San Francisco’s Planning Commission and Fine Arts Museums; Charles Fracchia, founder of the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society; and Amy Meyer, a former Presidio Trust board member and Co-Chair of People For a Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Ms. Meyer’s comments in support of a History Center include, “It would help fulfill a portion of the legislative mandate for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA): preservation for public use and enjoyment of outstanding historic values and provision of educational opportunities.”

Mr. Heyman added his support for the concept of a Center while expressing concerns over other proposals, saying that, “The discussion and processes leading to the adoption of the Presidio Trust Management Plan assumed that the [Presidio’s] Main Post would be the site for visitor orientation to the Park, its military importance and how it symbolizes the development of the American West. A number of us urged that this could

be accomplished by a vivid presentation of the Presidio history. I fear that this idea is being jettisoned in favor of projects designed to attract visitors to support commercial activities, with little attention paid to the basic purposes of the park.”

“It is very tempting to go primarily with the economic flow, but if this pressure displaces the responsibility of the Trust to present a coherent historical picture of the Presidio in a prime location for visitors, a fundamental mistake is being made,” Heyman added.

The Presidio Trust will hold a public meeting on the competing museum proposals at the Presidio Officers’ Club on December 3 at 6:30 PM.

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A Fact Sheet on the Proposal is Attached. More Information Available on Request.

The Presidio Historical Association is a non-profit organization promoting public education about the Presidio of San Francisco and American History.