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PRESIDIO TRUST CONSIDERS NEW MOVIE MULTIPLEX THOUGH PUBLIC OPPOSES URBANIZING HISTORIC NATIONAL PARK

The Presidio Trust's announcement that it is considering a plan to build a new movie multiplex in the park's most historic district, near the proposed site of a controversial art museum and large hotel, has drawn strong criticism from the Presidio Historical Association, a nonprofit watchdog group.

Project renderings of the multiplex show a modern-style, 18,000 sq. ft. annex to the historic 1930s-era Main Post theater that once served U.S. Army families stationed at the old base.

The Trust, which governs the Presidio of San Francisco, a National Park, recently has moved swiftly and contrary to nearly unanimous public opposition from diverse groups to advance plans for a large contemporary art museum and hotel that would commercialize the historic park's grounds.

"Standards that apply to National Historic Landmark Districts such as the Presidio make all three of these proposed modern buildings unacceptable," said Gary Widman, President of the Presidio Historical Association.

Widman suggested the Trust was acting like an urban renewal agency in a blighted area rather than a public entity entrusted with preserving a publicly owned, irreplaceable historic site.

Last summer, the Trust selected a contractor for a proposed 80,000 sq. ft. hotel. In January 2008, the Trust announced that it was moving forward with plans for a highly controversial 100,000 sq. ft. contemporary art museum proposed by Gap Store founder and former Trust president Donald Fisher to house his private art collection.

All three structures are to be built on the Presidio's most historic site, the Main Post, founded as a garrison by Spain in 1776 as the cornerstone of San Francisco. They would add a total of 198,000 sq. ft. of new construction -- the equivalent of over three football fields -- to the Main Post, home to the Spanish, Mexican and later American military from 1776 to 1994. More than 30,000 U.S. soldiers and their families are buried less than a mile away.

"In more than a decade since it assumed control of the Presidio, the Trust

has failed to take any action to interpret the Presidio's rich history for its visitors," he noted. The park has not had an onsite history museum since 1997. The Presidio Historical Association proposed a history center as a more suitable alternative to Fisher's museum. Since then, the Trust has floated a sketchy plan for a history "museum without walls", in addition to the Fisher Museum, hotel and theater

The Trust has not held public hearings to discuss the theater metroplex. Two public meetings on the Fisher museum and history center alternative were held during last December's busy holiday season, generating hundreds of written public comments to the Trust. The vast majority of these comments opposed the Fisher museum and its intended location. Newspapers and internet blogs were filled with letters from the general public as well as history, military, environmental and neighborhood organizations criticizing the Trust's actions in support of Fisher's plan.

In January, the historical association formally requested that the National Trust for Historic Preservation include the Presidio on its 2008 list of "Most Endangered Historic Places" due to the threat posed by the Fisher and hotel proposals. The movie metroplex will only further damage the park, said Widman.

"The Presidio Trust's support for such incompatible, massive modernistic structures in the heart of a designated National Historic Landmark District it is charged with protecting, shows insensitivity to 230 years of American history and a willingness to sacrifice forever the Presidio's most historically significant site for a profit," Widman said.

If built, the movie metroplex will sit on the Presidio's historic Main Post across the street from the massive Fisher art museum, a few hundred yards from the 100-room hotel, according to Trust documents. The movie complex, proposed by the San Francisco Film Institute, is double the size of the 1930s-era Post Theater now located on the site.

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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.