

Pacific Heights News

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PHRA, Merchants Team Up To Defeat Chain Store on Fillmore

Unified opposition from PHRA and the Fillmore Merchants Association convinced the San Francisco Planning Commission to turn down an application by Ralph Lauren to open a store on Fillmore Street in the spot most recently occupied by Smith & Hawken.

The hearing was held under an ordinance that requires chain stores to obtain a Conditional Use permit to open in Neighborhood Commercial Districts. The 6-1 decision (Michael Antonini dissenting) was precedent-setting. Although Fillmore Street has more than a dozen chain operations, Ralph Lauren was the first case since the “formula retail” ordinance was passed.

The draft motion of disapproval will be presented to the Commission on April 3, and the company representatives may speak again then. Ralph Lauren has notified PHRA that it has hired consultants to appeal the Commission’s hearing to the Board of Supervisors, if necessary.

Architects from the clothing giant appeared at a PHRA board meeting before the Planning hearing to show that the store doesn’t have a chain look; it designs stores individually to fit into the community. They repeated the stance at the Planning Commission hearing. An architect said Lauren customers want smaller stores in smaller locations – then undermined his own case by saying he personally patronizes small shops on Blecker Street in New York.

The design of the façade, however, was never the issue. The PHRA board decision was based on other principles. One factor is the deep pockets of big chains. They can afford high rents. That inevitably leads to rising rents, squeezing out small local retailers when their leases come up for renewal.

If independent stores are replaced by chains, Fillmore Street would lose its distinction. Now it is an attractive place for San Franciscans and visitors from around the country and around the world to shop for things they’ll find nowhere else. Were it to become a

collection of outlets for companies that have stores everywhere, there would be no incentive for people to come here.

Increasing rents also drive out neighborhood-serving businesses such as shoe repair, dry cleaning, drug stores and the long-lamented Fillamento. High rents are also a threat to the street’s important thrift shops; Victorian House is the latest casualty.

PHRA members and directors made additional points at the Planning Commission hearing:

- Corporate headquarters don’t care what happens in San Francisco; they support the bottom line. In

contrast to the local merchants who post signs for community events, contribute to local causes – and keep profits in the city – the chains refer all requests for help to headquarters, and never respond back. An example

was an animal-related benefit put on by Marc Jacobs, not for Pets Unlimited, two blocks away but for an organization in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

- Smith & Hawken avoided problems by making sure deliveries were completed by 7 a.m. Ralph Lauren expected to get daily deliveries via FedEx, which, speakers noted, would have to double park.

Lauren signed a 10-year sub-lease with Smith & Hawken and threatened that “If we don’t come in you’ll get another, less attractive store. Planning Commissioner Hisashi Sugaya said, “I won’t be held hostage by the fact they signed a lease without a permit.” Commissioner Sue Lee agreed with the neighbors, “Operators do not engage with the neighborhood,” and Commissioner Dwight Alexander noted, “Once you open the door it doesn’t stop.”

Thomas Reynolds, president of the Fillmore Merchants Association, noting that Fillmore Street is “one of the city’s finest Neighborhood Commercial Districts” asked for the Commission’s help in retaining the local character and moving back to a non-chain store environment. As for the lease, he said, “There are always people waiting to rent.”

What is your opinion? Are you open to chain stores on Fillmore Street? Do you want to attempt making a distinction between upscale stores and mass outlets such as hamburger shops? Let us know. Contact your PHRA Board by phone (415)-922-3572 or email at info@phra-sf.org

Muni Proposes Major Changes In Pacific Heights Routes

Elimination of the #3 Jackson and #4 Sutter trolley bus lines and a change in the route of the #24 Divisadero are among the changes proposed by the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency.

After review by the SFMTA starting in May and environmental assessment starting in June, service changes will begin July 2009.

The overall priorities of the Transit Effectiveness Project are to improve Muni reliability by making service more predictable. That entails reducing travel times and increasing frequency on the busiest routes, thus relieving overcrowding.

Compensating for the loss of #3 Jackson and #4 Sutter lines, Muni proposes increasing frequency on the #2 Clement and the #22 Fillmore. The #2 would be scheduled every three minutes (instead of the current four) in morning and evening commute hours and every 7½ minutes (instead of the current 10) in mid-day. The #22 Fillmore would run every 5-6 minutes, morning and evening, instead of the current 10 (morning) and seven (evening). Mid-day service would be stepped up by half a minute.

The #24 Divisadero, which like the #3 currently provides service across Jackson Street from Divisadero to Fillmore, would instead turn down Scott Street and terminate in the Marina, instead of on Jackson Street at Webster. It is proposed to run every 7½ minutes morning and evening, instead of the current nine and 10-minute intervals. Mid-day service would remain at 10- minutes.

The #12 Folsom bus, running across Jackson and Washington streets, would cut five to 10 minutes from the interval between buses.

Members of the public are invited to attend community workshops in late March and early April – not yet scheduled – and to submit online comments using a rather cumbersome form. The link to the form is found in a blue box on this web site: www.sfstep.com/docs.html.

PHRA will encourage Muni to hold a public meeting in Pacific Heights and will also encourage 2gether, the multi-neighborhood organization, to be involved.

Drew's Building Plans Proceed

Drew School at Broderick and California school has been quietly moving ahead on plans to demolish a three-flat Victorian building and replace it with a large assembly space, faculty offices and three classrooms.

The PHRA Board views the project as unnecessary – the school has access to meeting space across the street in a church – and as an expansion of a non-residential use of the land.

That, in the words of PHRA President Greg Scott, is a bad precedent, contrary to PHRA's mission of maintaining our residential character. (See below).

Drew has initiated the environmental review process, which will include demolishing the house as one of the alternatives.

"We need to stand on principal, Scott said. He noted that the Hamlin School on Broadway was given a Victorian house adjacent to its property on the Vallejo Street side, and California Pacific Medical Center owns an apartment building on Sacramento Street between Webster and Buchanan streets which has been emptied of all tenants except one.

District 5 Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, who attended the Board's March meeting, said that the "constant chipping away" of residential units will continue and is encouraged by the Mayor's office. He said he was ambivalent about the demolition because he was "heartened" by the greenness of the plan. Being south of California Street, Drew is in District 5.

Plant Grass, Not Concrete

Filling the area between a house and the sidewalk with a concrete parking pad is now contrary to the city codes, as well as being harmful to the environment.

Supervisor Gerardo Sandoval, who authored the legislation outlawing parking in the setback area, explained at a recent directors' meeting that paving over the ground means that rain will run off into the gutter and into San Francisco's overloaded sewer system, sometimes resulting in overflow or the discharge of untreated sewage into the bay or ocean.

Rain that seeps through a garden or a lawn makes its way to an aquifer, potentially watering street trees and preventing the ground from subsiding while sparing the sewer system.

The Pacific Heights Residents Association (PHRA) is a non-profit, member-supported, volunteer group of residents interested in maintaining the quality of life and the residential character within the boundaries of Union to Bush streets, Presidio to Van Ness.

Will the proposed Muni changes impact you? What changes would you propose? Please give us your input at info@phra.org or 922-3572. Please be sure to copy the city, info@sfstep.com on all emails.

Rebuilding Japan Center May Have Wide Ripple Effect

Owners of the Japan Center are considering a major rebuilding to rehabilitate and modernize the 40-year-old complex.

During a three-year construction phase, many of the shops might be forced to relocate, perhaps into temporary buildings on a lane of Webster Street and the garage may be forced to close. The garage closure will have a ripple effect well into Pacific Heights.

At the present, California Pacific Medical Center leases 375 spaces in the garage for staff, which then arrives at the Pacific complex by shuttle. Unless alternatives can be found, those drivers may create additional parking pressure in a wide radius around the hospital facilities.

That pressure will not lessen when the hospital moves to a proposed new site at Van Ness and Geary, and probably will increase. Hospital staff will still use the garage and simply be transported to the new site, while new commuters set up offices in the Buchanan Street building.

CPMC Submits Revised Environmental Study Request

The Marchese Company, representing California Pacific Medical Center, submitted a revised Environmental Evaluation Application (EEA) to the Planning Department dated February 21, 2008.

There are several changes from the previous application. PHRA and the CPMC Neighbors Coalition are currently reviewing the document.

We will be sending out a summary, as well as notice of any public hearings on CPMC plans.

If you would like to be on the mailing list for updates on CPMC activities, please send an e-mail to cpmcneighbors@att.net with your name and address.

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Proposed Presidio Museum Deemed Inappropriate for Area

The Contemporary Art Museum of the Presidio proposed by the Fisher family is too big, architecturally inappropriate for the site and would pose serious traffic problems for surrounding areas, in the view of the PHRA directors.

PHRA's opinion is shared by the other organizations that form Neighborhood Associations for Presidio Planning. The proposal has also spawned an ad hoc group being formed to gain the support of Supervisor Michela Alioto-Pier, Muni and other city bodies.

As noted in an op-ed article in the San Francisco Chronicle, the proposed museum would draw 4000 visitors per day, not counting staff, overwhelming access to the Presidio as well as within the Presidio.

The starkly modern, white building would be in complete contrast with the Civil War era brick buildings surrounding the Parade Ground, all part of the most historic part of the Presidio.

PHRA is taking its case to the San Francisco Coalition of Neighborhoods to see if there is support for its position, recognizing the great generosity of the Fisher family for enabling the public to see the art. The main question is whether a museum of that size and scale should be located anywhere in the Presidio.

Disaster Training Scheduled

Classes for citizens who would like to join a Neighborhood Emergency Response Team will be conducted at California Pacific Medical Center's Pacific Complex from May 7 to June 11.

The six Wednesday sessions will be taught from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. in the Enright room.

The course, taught by the San Francisco Fire Department, educates people on how to help themselves, then others, in the event of a disaster, such as a major earthquake. Classes include use of a home fire extinguisher; when, whether and how to turn off utilities; basic search and rescue including triage – determining whether a building is safe to enter and who is in greatest need of medical care.

NERT originated in the wake of the earthquake in 1989. It is based on the premise that in case of catastrophe, the police and fire departments will be overwhelmed and the public will be on its own for 72 hours.

Would you like to be on the email alert list, to receive notice of important public meetings between newsletters? Just send an email to info@phra-sf.org.

Preserving Residential Quality Means Limits on Home-Based Businesses

Preserving the residential quality of Pacific Heights means, by definition, limiting business activity.

PHRA is currently taking action against two businesses operating businesses that it believes to be in violation of the zoning, an art gallery on California Street and a wine sales operation on Pacific.

The case of the art gallery was brought to the directors' attention by neighbors who objected to the delivery trucks parked in front and by large parties throughout the year. The owners of the house at 1969 California Street defended the gatherings as fundraisers for various art-related causes. They claimed that very few customers came to the premises; most of their art is stored elsewhere and most of the business is conducted over the internet.

Their attorney found that if the building is declared a historic landmark the owners can, after six months, apply for a Conditional Use permit to operate the business. That is the path they are taking. PHRA plans to oppose issuance of the permit.

While having a home office is permissible, and there are many such offices in the neighborhood, there are important restrictions. There must be no signage

indicating there is a business in the house, there must not be a stream of customers coming into the house, and there may be no employees for the business in the house. It is the latter point on which PHRA based its complaint to the Planning Department.

Bruno and Urannia Ristow, operators of Ristow Vineyards and owners of 2518 Pacific Avenue, applied to the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control for licenses for off-sale beer and wine. That is, a customer could purchase wine to take home, although the owners indicated their intention was to sell only by direct mail, telephone or the Internet.

At the January meeting of the directors, the Ristows' attorney asked whether the PHRA president had a computer in his home from which he conducted business communications. The president, a Certified Public Accountant, replied that he does no billing from his home, meets no clients in his home and engages in no commercial activities in his home.

A PHRA member protested to the ABC against issuance of the license. On the issue of employees on the premises, PHRA will object at the Planning Department if the ABC grants the licenses.