

Pacific Heights News

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PHRA Actions Begin with Input from City and Neighbors

One of the basic tenets of PHRA is upholding provisions of the city's planning and building codes.

That's part of the reason that PHRA becomes very vocal when major changes are contemplated, such as policy shifts written into the proposed Housing Element of the city's General Plan. Directors know that developers will always build to the maximum allowed.

For a nominal annual fee, PHRA receives all the "311 Notices" issued in Pacific Heights. Those are the notices otherwise sent to all the residences with a 150 foot radius of a proposed building or remodeling job.

No Variances Needed? No Action

Many of projects involve enlarging houses – adding height, width, or extending into the back yard, often to the distress of neighbors. Nonetheless, if the expansion requires no variances, PHRA will generally take no action.

Recently the owners of the Casebolt Mansion, a historic building on Pierce Street, objected to a neighbor's plan for an extension of its house to the rear. As the Casebolt house is set well back from the street, the addition would cast shadows and perhaps infringe on the esthetics of its unique double staircase.

However, the neighbor would still have the required amount of rear yard after the proposed extension and no variance was required. PHRA directors remained neutral.

PHRA became very involved with a project involving 2615-2623 Pacific Avenue, which it learned of through the permit process. The huge building was comprised of five family-size rental units, three or four bedrooms and more than 2,000 square feet each, a rarity in Pacific Heights.

Some Struggles Last Years

Two years ago a developer used the state's Ellis Act to evict all the tenants and take the house out of the rental business, planning a 16,000 foot mega mansion. He then proceeded to gut the building. PHRA was able to get the building department to put a halt to the project. The shell of the building stood empty for several years.

A long fight with the developer ensued; PHRA's position prevailed. Work has resumed on the house, returning it to its five-unit status. Because the Ellis Act took the house permanently out of the rental market, the units will be sold as Tenants in Common.

Sometimes situations are brought to PHRA by neighbors. Such is the case with 1969 California Street, the home of the Anthony Meier Fine Arts Gallery and the Meier family.

By telephone and emails, neighbors contacted PHRA about blocked driveways. They objected to parking and traffic occasioned by the business,

Continued on page 4

Urban Design Writer to Speak At PHRA Annual Meeting

John King, urban design writer for the San Francisco Chronicle and a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist, will be the featured speaker at PHRA's Annual Meeting October 25.

The meeting is scheduled 6-8 p.m. at the Schools of the Sacred Heart, 2222 Broadway.

King has been briefed on some of the issues of greatest concern to PHRA, such as proposed high-rises encroaching on the area from the east, and the threat of greater density around neighborhood commercial districts that could result if the Housing Element is accepted.

The meeting will begin with a reception with wine arranged by Vino, the shop on California Street, and hors d'oeuvres. That is an opportunity for members to socialize and to meet invited guests including Northern Station's new captain, Al Casciato. Several local groups and authors will set up information tables.

PHRA President Greg Scott will provide a quick summary of the year's activities during the very brief business portion of the meeting.

Registration at the door costs \$45 for members, \$55 for others.

PHRA Raises Questions About Proposed Museum in the Presidio

Is a fine arts museum an appropriate addition to the Main Post of the Presidio? If one is built there, what will be the effects on parking and traffic in Pacific Heights, Presidio Heights and Cow Hollow?

PHRA has asked the Presidio Trust to consider such questions as it prepares an environmental impact study for the proposed Fisher Art Museum. Gap founder Don Fisher has proposed constructing a 100,000 square foot, 45-foot high museum – larger than the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art – in the Presidio, preferably in the vicinity of the Main Post.

In a letter to John Pelka, environmental compliance manager for the Trust, PHRA said, “Is any fine arts museum appropriate to the program and purpose of the Presidio and its role as a National Park with a significant military and native history and a vibrant laboratory of various habitats?”

Is a Museum Appropriate for the Site?

The Trust’s Notice of Intent to Prepare an EIS and Conduct Scoping, dated August 8, 2007, states that a museum or other cultural use at the Main Parade Ground site may animate and activate the open space development. Trust staff expressed to the Neighborhood Association for Presidio Planning that such a development would encourage the rehabilitation of the Montgomery Street barracks. The EIS must show how the construction of an art museum can accomplish those objectives, PHRA’s letter stated.

Take the time to prepare a comprehensive plan for cultural uses in the Presidio, PHRA asked. “As a first step, assess the kinds of museums that would enhance the overall development of the Presidio as a National Park and prepare a plan that identifies type, placement, and, most important, transportation and parking mitigation measures for all cultural institutions and museums.

The south end of the Main Post is the location preferred by the Fisher family. The impact of a huge contemporary building on the Main Post needs to be studied, regardless of the Department of the Interior’s guidelines, PHRA stated. The Montgomery Street barracks set the visual tone for this important site and inappropriately large new construction might have a negative effect on the integrity of the site.

The former commissary, currently occupied by the Sports Basement, which is located adjacent to Crissy Field, is being considered as an alternative site. Excessive height and bulk in this location is also of concern.

Alternate Sites Available

Located near, but not in the Presidio, The Exploratorium, has been mentioned as an alternative site when it is vacated.

Fort Scott has a prominent location in the Presidio and yet it has not yet been impacted by change. The site is easily accessible to San Franciscans and tourists, as well as to other counties in the Bay Area. PHRA urged the Trust to consider this location as a viable alternative site.

Using Fort Scott for the museum would help disperse traffic and has more space for parking the anticipated influx of cars and tour buses.

Finally, PHRA said, “The EIS should include traffic and parking studies within the Presidio and include city streets in the Marina and Cow Hollow neighborhoods to the east, the Pacific Heights and Presidio Heights neighborhoods to the south. Neighborhoods outside the Lombard Gate area are currently experiencing stress caused by Presidio parking overflow.

The Fort Scott site is the only location that may not exacerbate problems on the eastern and northeastern sides of the Presidio. Comprehensive traffic and transportation studies need to examine museum and special event usage and find ways to accommodate buses and cars.

Association of Associations Formed

PHRA has been instrumental in forming a new coalition of all the neighborhood organizations in District 2.

Dubbed 2gether, the organization held its first public October 15 at the Claire Lilienthal School in the Marina on the topic of transit and parking, and several ballot measures.

The idea behind the organization, led by PHRA Director Lynne Newhouse Segal, is to present an organized voice to the city on matters relating to District 2 as a whole. It is expected to be a conduit for two-way communication between District 2 Supervisor Michela Alioto-Pier and the neighborhood groups.

The idea for 2gether was initially presented to the PHRA Board by Paul Wermer. Wermer, a director, lives on California Street in District 5 and modeled his suggestion on the successful operation of SF5Together in that district.

PHRA Board Adds Two

Two long-term residents of Pacific Heights, Carola Shepard and Joe Murphy, have joined the PHRA board of directors.

Carola has a Master of City Planning degree from UC Berkeley and moved to Pacific Heights in 1979, shortly after obtaining it. She worked professionally as an urban and environmental planner for five years, both for the city's Clean Water Program and private consulting firms. In 1984, she entered what was then considered the new and cutting edge field of telecommunications and became a "strategic planner" for Pacific Bell. She retired from the paid workplace while her two children were still young and became very active as a community volunteer.

Carola's family has lived on a busy block of Jackson Street since 1983 and has enjoyed the "urban village" lifestyle of this neighborhood. Her two children attended Hamlin and Stuart Hall and being able to walk to school, parks, cafes and shops was one of the great pleasures of their childhood.

Joe Murphy has lived in Pacific Heights since 1993. He and his wife Cathy have been married for 36 years and are active members of St. Vincent de Paul Church. Joe is also on the educational committee for St. Mary of the Virgin Church.

Professionally he has been a career advisor and executive coach since 1991. His specialty is working with successful people and companies who want to

become even more successful. He has been in private practice for the past seven years and is a principal with Geodesic Consulting. He teaches coaching courses at San Francisco State University and also has taught at the University of Phoenix. He has an MBA from the University of Colorado.

Joe is on the boards of two other non-profit organizations. Compass Community Services which helps homeless families and Consumer Credit Counseling Service, which helps families restore their financial futures.

PHRA Directors

Judith Duffy
 J. P. Harbour
 Noel Kirshenbaum
 Connie Tompkins McCole
 Joe Murphy
 Margot Parke
 Alice Piccus
 Lynne Newhouse Segal
 Carola Shepard
 Greg Scott, President
 Paul Wermer

Administration

Hennie Wisniewski
PHRA Hotline
 922-3572

PHRA Web Site

www.phra-sf.org
Pacific Heights News
 donlangley@sbcglobal.net

For Cell Phone Users, An Alternative to Calling 911

When an emergency arises, your reflexive response is to call 911. **If you're on a cell phone, don't. Call 553-8090 instead.**

From cell phones, 911 calls go to the California Highway Patrol, not the city's call center, and the CHP assumes you're on a freeway somewhere. The responder will not know where you are calling from, will probably not be familiar with the area, and will not be able to help as quickly and appropriately as somebody local.

If you're calling from a land line – home, office, or pay phone, for example – 911 will connect you to the city's emergency dispatchers.

For **non-emergency calls** there's a new number as well. Instead of using the long list of city department numbers published earlier in Pacific Heights News, or the far longer list in the telephone directory, just call 311.

You'll get a live person on the line, 24/7, who will be able to route you to the proper department. Further, the new service enables you to track progress on your issue. The operator notes your name and the exact time and date you called and provides a case number. You can call back at any time, refer to the case number and the operator will know exactly what you're talking about and can provide an update

Good Neighbor Policy is a Good Idea

As the architect for the planned rebuilding of 60 Presidio Terrace remarked, Pacific Heights is sick of construction. There are blocks where major building or remodeling projects have gone on for years.

What can be done? If you're the homeowner of any construction site, consider what you might do to ensure good relations with your neighbors for the years after you're done. Remind your contractor to minimize noise, dust and dirt and to observe the limits on construction hours.

The No Parking signs that allow them to bring their equipment to the site is for working hours only; that street parking must be available to residents in the evening. The contractor should ask the workers to have good manners. That is, no trash, no throwing cigarette butts and no offensive language.

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.

Several Factors, Public and Private, Trigger PHRA Action

Continued from page 1

including delivery trucks as well as people coming to see the art and students coming to use their library of art books.

The Meiers and their attorney appeared at the October PHRA board meeting. They pointed out that only 20 per cent of the house is used for the business, less than the 25 per cent allowed by the code. They use valet parking for the dozen or so times a year when they have fund-raiser dinners for 25 or so people or cocktail parties for 35 to 40 people at the opening of a show. There is no obvious store frontage – actually 95% of the transactions are done on the internet – and no signage. They claimed some neighbors were happy to have them drive out squatters that had inhabited the building more than a year.

However, the space devoted to the business includes a basement office. Meier travels approximately half of the year and has an employee in that office. Having an employee is a code violation.

Meier's solution to the problem is to seek landmark status for the 1915 Willis Polk building. If he obtains

that, after six months he can apply for a Conditional Use Permit for the business on the grounds that the income is essential to maintaining and restoring the 10,000 square foot building.

PHRA, still skeptical of the valet parking operation and concerned about the foot traffic, remains opposed. If Meier gains landmark status and applies for a CU, PHRA will seek restrictions on the permit on the number of events, people, of pickups and deliveries and other activities.

An Exception to the Policy

There is a single exception to PHRA's support of the city's codes. Because of the chronic housing shortage, the Planning Department policy opposes dwelling unit mergers. PHRA does not object to combining units if the project tends to restore a house to its original configuration, such as a Victorian that had been converted into flats. Such restorations may eliminate an apartment or two but they create much-needed family housing and enhance Pacific Heights' residential quality, which is our mission.