

Keep The Arboretum Free

The Honorable Mayor Gavin Newsom
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
Room 200
San Francisco, Ca. 94102

Date: May 15th, 2009

Re: Proposed Fee at Strybing Arboretum

Dear Mayor Newsom,

We are opposed to any fee to enter the San Francisco Arboretum & Botanical Garden.

On behalf of a large and growing number of citizens opposed to this, we ask that you keep Strybing Arboretum free and open to all.

The proposal by the Recreation and Park Department will deny free access to a public and historic portion of the commons space in Golden Gate Park. It will reduce attendance, diminish the reputation of city governance, demoralize and disenfranchise many residents that enjoy this much-loved public landmark.

It is clear that the partnership of the Recreation & Park Department and the SF Botanical Garden Society fully intend to impose fees on SF residents:

“WE WILL START BY CHARGING NON-RESIDENTS”

– Jared Blumenfeld, Interim Gen. Manager Rec & Park Dept. May 7th, 2009 Commission meeting

The reasons cited for the fee proposal do not justify it. The Arboretum has been sustained as a wonderful and highly appreciated garden for 68 years through tax-payer funds, generous contributions, fund raising and volunteerism. Although the city is facing a budget crisis, the Arboretum can operate, as it has historically proven, with a properly managed budget. The Botanical Garden Society has been citing vandalism as another reason for the need for a fee, but no statistics have been publicly offered to back this claim.

The proposal is a development plan and is out-of-sync with the majority of city residents.

The Rec and Park Department /Botanical Garden Society partnership has asserted that the fee proposal plan would enable improvements to upgrade the quality of the Arboretum to attain “world class” and “museum” status. The majority of visitors to the Arboretum are greatly satisfied with its current stature. **This is not a legitimate reason to spend city tax monies.**

Fees will take common public space and reserve it for those who can pay. The land that contains the Arboretum is public land and belongs to the City of San Francisco. Tax-payer dollars have helped fund the Arboretum over the decades. To ask residents to pay fees or restrict their access to this public resource needs a compelling reason. Today, the Arboretum is a public sanctuary for many people who cannot afford to have a peaceful garden. The fee proposal means obtaining and displaying special ID cards to pass through monitored gates creating a new hardship for already over-burdened citizens.

Charging non-residents sets the stage to charge residents sooner or later. There was strong and immediate opposition to the original proposal to charge fees. The up-front capital cost and added operating costs of running fee collection and enforcement infrastructure make it very likely that after imposition of any fees, they will need to be increased regularly and dramatically and be applied across the board to residents and non-residents.

The financial plan behind the fee proposal appears seriously flawed. No detail has been provided regarding the analysis that delivers positive financial value for the expansion projects. Indeed, accurate visitor numbers are unknown to the Rec & Park Commission and to the Botanical Garden Society, which makes proper financial forecasting impossible. The plan appears even less tenable when considering the strong backlash to the fee proposal and likely declines in attendance.

There hasn't been enough public disclosure. This fee proposal has not been presented broadly enough to city residents for discussion and there hasn't been adequate transparency about critical details. At the minimum, much more time is needed to study this measure and to present it fully to the residents of all 11 districts. **The Rec & Park/ Botanical Garden Society plan must be properly disclosed**, accurate data used for assumptions and it must be impartially analyzed for viability. It would be reckless to effect this harsh and costly-to-reverse plan otherwise.

Action requested: We ask the Mayor's office, Board of Supervisors and Rec & Park Commission to reject this proposal before more energy is spent on it. **Residents who learn of this measure are overwhelmingly opposed to any fees being charged.** The budget crisis should not be used as an excuse for the rapid development of this ill-conceived plan.

Respectfully,

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