



The Newspaper of the San Francisco Bay Chapter

# Fee proposal would move towards privatizing Arboretum

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Is Golden Gate Park going to be turned into an expansive series of commercial attractions?

The Recreation and Parks Commission is proposing to charge admission at the San Francisco Botanical Garden, known also by its original name as the Strybing Arboretum.

San Francisco has had a free, open, public Arboretum for 70 years. It serves a wide range of people, ranging from students of botany to casual visitors seeking a wonderful place to stroll, sit, and relax. It is a tourist attraction - but also for many people a neighborhood park.

The proposed Arboretum charge is \$5 for San Franciscans and \$7 for non-residents. Admission would be free for members of the San Francisco Botanical Society; but individual memberships currently begin at \$60 annually, and it is reported that they will be raised to \$75.

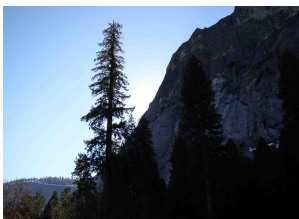
On April 6 around 250 people showed up to oppose this plan at a public meeting, and rumor has it that in response, a modified version may be issued to charge only for non-residents.

The Arboretum's neighbors in the park - the De Young Museum, the Academy of Sciences, and the Japanese Tea Garden - already charge substantial fees and are hardly affordable for frequent visits. Other nearby fee-based areas include the baseball fields at Big Rec, the bowling greens, the tennis courts, and the Conservatory of Flowers.

Will the next step in these hard times be charging for public libraries? Especially when so many are feeling the pinch of the economy, we should be keeping our open spaces free, not turning them into commodities. Parks and nature are necessary for our health and community. They are the balm that comforts our urban cares. Parks are also where we all have a chance to meet and greet each other. Charging for access to the Garden would restrict open-space access for many. The Sierra Club urges San Francisco to keep its Arboretum free.

If passed, these fees will never be repealed. Jared Blumenfeld, the Recreation and Park Department's interim director, said as much in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (March 25), "the fees would likely never be repealed, but they would help ensure the garden remains `world class'." The Sierra Club believes that community access, health, nature, and education are values that come before `world class'.

Charging only for non-residents is not a viable alternative. Considering the costs of setting up restricting gates and hiring fee-collectors, it seems unlikely that the fees would bring in much revenue. If the infrastructure is built, economics will force the fees to be extended to residents.



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In any case, why should even non-residents pay? Many of them are people who grew up in San Francisco but were priced out of the city. Now, when they return from their cheaper apartment in Pacifica or the East Bay to visit mom, should they again be priced out of even joining her for a stroll in the Garden?

On a recent walk through the Arboretum, I asked a sampling of people about the proposed fees. Most responded that indeed they would not be able to pay.



In defending the fee, the Botanical Society points to several problems. Teenagers have entered the Garden to have a beer party. Occasionally someone is found asleep in the Arboretum in the morning. Plants have been stolen.

In our urban environment, though, charging admission will do little to change such behavior. The chain-link fencing surrounding the Arboretum can easily be scaled by agile teenagers. The homeless will find an occasional hole in the fencing. Sophisticated plant black-marketers will find a way in, especially if a more "world class"

Garden starts propagating more rare plants. Short of double chain-link fencing topped by razor wire and night-time guards, we can't keep all trespassers out. Charging admission would keep out much of the general public - with little effect on the few trouble-makers.

We fear that the main effect of the fees would be to turn the Arboretum into the semi-exclusive preserve of Botanical Society members, largely excluding poor people, parents with children, and many casual recreationists - from one of the city's most significant open-space areas. It will cut these people off from a prime educational resource that helps them learn to value nature.

We are also concerned about basic operational questions. To date we have not seen clear disclosure of how such a fee would be collected; to whom it would accrue (the city or the Society); how much it would cost to collect the fee; and how the Arboretum would be protected at night by fees, if night protection is indeed a major motivation for the fees. Amazingly, at the April 6 meeting the Garden admitted that it has no data on visitation, let alone visitor residency, to allow realistic projections.

There are many alternative proposals for more effective fundraising for the Garden. For example, recently the Arboretum installed donation boxes. These should be made more visible with more explanatory material. Even the current inconspicuous boxes collect \$50/day. Better boxes could increase that 5 - 50-fold.

In the January-February Yodeler we reported on a plan for a new nursery for the Arboretum that would cover large amounts of open space with buildings and pavements; introduce a new 20-foot-wide, 450-foot-long roadway, bisecting the Arboretum; and threaten the city's only remaining population of the endangered red-legged frog. The fee and the nursery proposals share a common theme: to make the Arboretum a more-restrictive, higher-toned, "world class" Garden - but without adequately weighing the local cost.

San Francisco has had a free, open, public Arboretum for 70 years. It is not time now to change that policy for anyone, especially not while people are feeling an economic pinch.

### **WhatYouCanDo**

Write to Mayor Gavin Newsom and your supervisor at:

*City Hall*  
*1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlet Place*

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and to the Recreation and Park Commission at:

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Tell them it is just not green to charge for admission to the Arboretum.

*Pinky Kushner, Executive Committee, Sierra Club San Francisco Group*

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