

SAN FRANCISCO BAY CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

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TO: All Design Review Board Members

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**SUBJECT: Exploratorium Relocation Project–Piers 15/17, City and County of San Francisco;
Third Focused Review**
(For Board consideration on May 5, 2008)

Project Summary

Project Applicants: The Port of San Francisco and The Exploratorium

Project Representatives: Tom Rockwell, Director of Exhibits, The Exploratorium; Marc L'Italien, Principal, EHDD Architects; Janice Thacher, Project Executive, and James Suh, Project Manager, Wilson Meany Sullivan.

Project Site. The proposed project would be located on Piers 15 and 17, along the San Francisco waterfront, near the intersection of Green Street and the Embarcadero, within the City and County of San Francisco. The site consists of the Pier 15 shed and bulkhead building, the Pier 17 shed, a paved parking area between the two piers known as the "valley", the north, south and east apron areas, a building on the eastern end of the valley that physically connects the two pier sheds known as the "connector building", and an approximately 1,579-square-foot free-standing office building within the western portion of the valley. Piers 15 and 17 are contributing resources to the San Francisco Embarcadero National Register Historic District. Currently, Baydelta Maritime leases space at Pier 15 and berths its tugboats along the southern apron of Pier 15.

San Francisco Waterfront Special Area Plan Policies. According to the *San Francisco Waterfront Special Area Plan* (SAP), the deck and pilings that form the valley between Piers 15 and 17, as well as the non-historic additions to the Pier 15 and Pier 17 sheds, are to be removed to create an open water area between the two pier sheds. As currently designed, the proposed courtyard would be inconsistent with the SAP policies. The project applicants have recognized that an amendment to the SAP would be needed to retain a portion of the valley and the non-historic portions of the pier shed, as currently proposed. The Commission would ultimately determine whether an amendment to the SAP should be approved and whether the proposed project is consistent with the currently or amended SAP policies, as the case may be.

Proposed Project. The proposed project involves the relocation of the Exploratorium from the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco to Piers 15 and 17 in two phases. The project applicants are in discussions with Baydelta Maritime about its future location within the project site. The proposed project assumes the possible relocation of Baydelta Maritime to Pier 17.



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Under Phase I, the project applicants would repair, renovate and seismically upgrade the Pier 15 substructure and Pier 15 shed and bulkhead building to house the Exploratorium's exhibits, a restaurant, museum store, classrooms, theatre and administrative offices. The project applicants would remove the small office building within the valley and approximately 34,300 square feet of the 98,350-square-foot valley floor. The remaining valley floor would be re-designed as a "courtyard" for public access, with a portion reserved as an outdoor exhibit area for paying customers. The project applicants also propose to remove the existing 27-foot-tall connector building at the east end of the valley and to construct a new 31-foot-tall "bridge building" that could link the Pier 15 and Pier 17 buildings in the future. The bridge building would house additional exhibits, a cafeteria, and be used for multi-purpose events.

As part of the seismic upgrade of Pier 15, new piles would be driven adjacent to the pier's south apron on the west and east side, that would allow for a wider apron to accommodate public access. A possible water taxi dock along the south apron may be included as Phase I to the project. Ceremonial berthing and temporary berthing of naval vessels by the Port are contemplated to remain along the east apron of Piers 15 and 17.

In order to accommodate the relocation of Baydelta Maritime's tug and tow operations to Pier 17, the project applicants would build new warehouse/office space within Pier 17 and repair the substructure and deck of the Pier 17 north apron, which is currently red-tagged and unusable. The Pier 17/Pier 19 water basin would also be dredged to accommodate the berthing of Baydelta Maritime's tugboats along the north apron of Pier 17.

The project applicants are also proposing various curb pull-outs along the Embarcadero sidewalk in front of Piers 15 and 17. The project applicants are currently studying the curb pull-out options based on feedback received from the Design Review Board ("DRB") at the last meeting on this project, and will present their proposal at a later DRB meeting. At that later meeting, the project applicants will also present their proposal to allow limited vehicular access along the south side of Pier 17 for delivery trucks to access the bridge building at the east end of the pier.

Under Phase II, the Exploratorium would exercise its option to lease Pier 17 in the 17th year of their lease. If this option is exercised, the Exploratorium would conduct a similar rehabilitation and expansion of its museum program into the Pier 17 facility.

Project "Zones" and Public Access. (See pages 10-13). The project applicants have proposed the following project "zones" and public access areas for the project:

1. **Zone 1: Exploratorium Entry Procession.** An approximately 29,750-square-foot public access area leading the public from the Embarcadero, through the marginal wharf, and into the courtyard plaza adjacent the Exploratorium's courtyard entrance.
2. **Zone 2: Bulkhead and Entrance Lobbies.** An enclosed, approximately 10,520-square-foot "Bayside History Walk" that showcases the internal structure of the pier and connects the Pier 15 bulkhead entrance with the courtyard entrance.
3. **Zone 3: Bay Walk.** An approximately 14,710-square-foot public access area along the south apron of Pier 17, with seating and views extending towards the center of the courtyard.
4. **Zone 4: Bridge.** An approximately 2,120-square-foot public access bridge connecting the north and south areas of the courtyard and that provides an area for exhibits and views to the Bay.

5. **Zone 5: Open Water.** An approximately 34,019-square-foot area of open water created by the removal of decking and piles in the valley. A “pile-water garden”, created by cut piles, would be located on the western end of the open water area near the marginal wharf.
6. **Zone 6: Outdoor Exhibit Area and Floating Dock.** An approximately 18,720-square-foot area reserved as an outdoor exhibit area for paying customers and includes a sunken exhibit platform/dock.
7. **Zone 7: Event Plaza.** An approximately 8,890-square-foot outdoor plaza on the west side of the bridge building, showcasing various events for paying customers.
8. **Zone 8: Bay Contemplation Plaza.** An approximately 15,270-square-foot public access “Port Walk” along the north and south aprons of Pier 15 that provides seating and viewing areas along the Bay’s edge.

Prior Board Review and Comments. The DRB reviewed the project at its January 7, 2008 meeting and commented on six particular aspects of the public access design. On March 10, 2008, the project applicants presented their response to the DRB’s first comment regarding the proposed Embarcadero curb pull-outs and bus drop-off area for school children. Additional comments by the DRB were made at that meeting, which will be addressed at a later meeting.

The May 5, 2008 meeting will focus on the DRB’s remaining five comments regarding: (1) the use of trees along the Embarcadero; (2) the design of the courtyard; (3) the views out to the Bay; (4) circulation around the project site; and (5) incorporating boats and research vessels into the public access design. Below is the project applicants’ response to the Board’s prior comments.

Prior Board Comment Regarding the Use of Trees Along the Embarcadero: *The Board was concerned about the use of trees along the Embarcadero and suggested that the trees be replaced with exhibits.*

Project Applicants’ Response: The project applicants have removed the trees from the proposed design and have designed the marginal wharf as a flexible open-air gallery with rotating exhibits provided by the Exploratorium (see pages 10 and 14). According to the project applicants, “six to eight exhibits on the marginal wharf, adjacent to Herb Caen Way, will be rolled out every day...” and “[a]t least two larger-scale pieces engage the promenade and respond to its surrounding environment to create an enticing curiosity marking the entryway.” A section of the marginal wharf would be replaced by transparent grating marking the seawall. The project applicants envision the entryway as a space that “awakens one’s senses to observation and inquiry and calls attention to both the marine and built qualities of the location.”

The project applicants are proposing some landscaping in other areas of the site (see pages 8 and 14 - 17). Stepped down planted areas would be strategically placed to “provide greenery as a foreground to important views”. Low regional plantings would be provided to demonstrate the effects of fog, wind and salinity, with plants irrigated by fresh, brackish and salty water, as well as miniature salt pond exhibits. According to the project applicants “plantings would be developed as a coordinated exhibit opportunity for the Exploratorium, in order to educate about the natural history of the Bay”.

Prior Board Comment Regarding the Design of the Courtyard: *The Board was concerned that the design of the courtyard was “over-programmed” and “too particular”. The Board suggested that the design of the*

courtyard be simpler, with a flexible and adaptable layout that provides effective outdoor learning experiments.

Project Applicants' Response: (Please see pages 8, 9, and 15). In order to simplify the courtyard yet still retain the concept of a dynamic, welcoming public space, the project applicants made six changes to the previous design. Along the marginal wharf, the project applicants reduced the area of transparent grating material marking the seawall to limit the amount of changed material and to increase potential exhibit space at the entrance. Within the west "pile garden", the project applicants reduced the number of pilings to simplify this space. The central island in the center of the courtyard was removed and replaced by a bridge, made up of two overlapping bridges, that provides an area for exhibits, and a viewing and resting spot. The bridge has been re-oriented and angled to facilitate public flow from the Exploratorium entrance out towards the Bay as well as from the north towards the museum entrance. Planting and stepped seating has been added on the north side of the courtyard, and on the south side, within the Exploratorium outdoor exhibit area, the sunken exhibit platform has been simplified and includes only one elevation change from the apron level. At the eastern end of the courtyard, the previous three bridges have been replaced by two and have been re-oriented to facilitate public circulation around the courtyard and to the end of the pier. The project applicants have eliminated their proposal for valet service at the end of the pier but are considering some delivery service vehicle loading/unloading, which will be presented at a later DRB meeting. Finally, the width of the Pier 15 south apron has been widened on both the western and eastern ends of the pier, to facilitate pedestrian circulation around the courtyard and to create plaza areas. The project applicants may include a water-taxi dock along the south apron that could function as a multi-use facility during Phase I of the project; however, financial implications may determine that it be built during Phase II.

Prior Board Comment Regarding the Views to the Bay: *The Board recommended changes to the site plan to allow greater views of the Bay and opportunities to draw the public out towards the end of the pier and the Bay views. With respect to the bridge building, the Board suggested that the project applicants decide between maximizing the view or creating a definitive building.*

Project Applicants' Response: (Please see pages 8, 15, and 22-24). The project applicants have simplified the courtyard, as discussed above, to include "angles and long simple lines that capture the flow of pedestrians from the north while responding to the industrial scale of the sheds." Along the north side of the courtyard, the proposed site plan includes "terraced seating with stepped down planted areas which allow guardrails to be lowered out of the way of important views to the Bay and the museum entry". According to the project applicants, "the purposeful angle of the bridges further encourages the movement of pedestrians towards the Bay, provides multiple viewpoints and expresses the dynamism that is central to the Exploratorium's mission." The bridge building has been intentionally designed with "simplicity and elegance of the form" to act as a "canvas for the Exploratorium to populate exhibits within, around and onto the structure." A 60-foot-wide view corridor out to the end of the pier and the Bay would be provided between the bridge building and the Pier 17 shed. Phase II of the project may include a connection from the bridge building's second floor to the adjacent Pier 17 which would alter this view corridor, but this is not currently being proposed. Any proposal for Phase II would be reviewed by the DRB in the future. The ground floor of the bridge building would be occupied by a publicly accessible café and outdoor dining is contemplated on the west and east sides of the building that would attract and draw the public closer to the Bay's edge. The second floor would be a multi-purpose event space open for third party rentals.

Prior Board Comment Regarding Circulation Around the Project Site: *The Board recommended changes to the overall public access plan to improve circulation around the project site. The Board suggested that the project be "viscerally accessible to the visitor" and designed to where people are – on the street, between the buildings, and at the water's edge.*

Project Applicants' Response: (Please see pages 10-13, and 19). The courtyard has been redesigned to improve circulation around the project site. As discussed above, the angles and long simple lines are intended to draw the public through and around the project site, including towards the museum, out towards the Bay, and around the pier sheds. The public access path, or PortWalk, would allow complete circulation around Pier 15, except when navy ships are in Port. The Port contemplates continuing the use of the east end of Piers 15 and 17 for ceremonial and navy ship berthing. While ships are berthed, the entire east apron would be closed for public access preventing the public from accessing the east apron and circulating around the entire pier apron. It is unclear at this time, how often and how many times navy ships would be berthed along the east end of the pier. The project applicants have indicated that navy ships typically berth for a 3-day time period and in 2005, ships were berthed for approximately 15 days of the year. This number may increase in the future.

Since the January DRB meeting, the project applicants have developed their concept for a Bayside History Walk within the Pier 15 bulkhead (see page 21). The Bayside History Walk would link the Pier 15 bulkhead entrance with the courtyard entrance and provide views of the inner structure of the pier shed and the bulkhead building. At the end of the bulkhead hall, a glass partition would provide a clear view through the museum, down the length of the pier shed, to the Bay. Along the Bayside History Walk would be entryways for a retail store, a café, a theater, and public restrooms. According to the project applicants, the Bayside History Walk would provide "a brief history of the Piers and the Exploratorium with exhibits, images, and videos illuminating the story and philosophy of the museum and the history of the area."

Prior Board Comment Regarding Incorporating Boats and Research Vessels: *The Board suggested that boats and research vessels be prominently displayed and incorporated into the overall public access design.*

Project Applicants' Response: The previous plan showed boats and small watercraft vessels possibly entering the courtyard area. The project applicants have revised this feature for reasons of practicality and safety. As discussed above, navy ships and large research vessels would be allowed to dock on the east apron. While navy ships are docked on the east apron, the entire east apron would be closed to public access and there would be no access to the south apron from the courtyard. The design of the guardrails and clearance to the mooring cleats along the public access pathways will be presented at a later DRB meeting. The project applicants are hoping "to balance the desire to have a working maritime apron with providing the most walkable public access area".

Public Access Issues. The Board's advice is sought on whether the project applicants' responses adequately address the Board's comments. Specifically, the Board should focus on the siting and massing of the new bridge building, the amount and quality of the public access proposed, the connections and circulation around the pier sheds, and any potential impacts the proposal could have on physical and visual access to the Bay. The staff requests that the Board consider the following questions during its review:

1. **Public Spaces.** Does the project provide usable and inviting public spaces that are oriented to the Bay and allow for adequate views to the Bay?
2. **Courtyard.** Does the proposed courtyard provide a flexible and adaptable layout that accommodates the number of individuals and variety of uses that would likely occur in this

area, provide effective outdoor learning experiments, and provide a smooth transition between public and private outdoor uses within the courtyard?

3. **Views.** Are there adequate view corridors from the Embarcadero promenade out to the Bay that would lead the public to and along the public access areas?
4. **Bridge Building.** Would the proposed siting, massing, and architectural treatments of the bridge building adequately preserve views to the Bay and maximize the public's enjoyment of the waterfront?
5. **Circulation.** Are the public access spaces and corridors on and around the courtyard, the east apron and the south apron designed to provide adequate circulation around the pier?
6. **Berthing Ships.** Would circulation around the project site be impaired by the closure of the east apron while navy ships are berthed?
7. **Bayside History Walk.** Does the Bayside History Walk provide adequate public access to the Bay's intimate and quiet spaces behind the historic bulkhead building and interpretation of San Francisco's maritime history