

Revolution in the Parks?

by Danielle Machotka

After years as a bastion of peaceful, military order, the Presidio of San Francisco is hosting a revolution. No weapons, no troop buildup. The trenches being dug are only to replace ailing infrastructure. There is, however, plenty of strategizing. Impassioned voices are being raised, communities are uniting, and a vision of a new and better Presidio is spurring people into action.

The revolution is not local. Elements of it could affect the powers granted to some federal government agencies in the future, giving them new authorities or exempting them from laws now considered inherent to their operation, such as regulations on civil service or procurement. The Presidio has become a national park—1500 acres of sandy coastline, tree-covered hills, and 6 million square feet of building space. Guarding the entrance to the San Francisco Bay, it lies surrounded on three sides by seven million people in the greater Bay Area. To call it unique in the national park system is almost too obvious.

Its story immediately sets it apart. For as many as 5000 years, it was home to Ohlone Indians. The land was marked as the site for the Spanish presidio by Juan Bautista de Anza in 1776, but came under Mexican control when Mexico declared independence from Spain in 1821. Falling into disuse and disrepair, it was easily captured for the United States in 1846 by Captain John Frémont, who, smitten with the setting, named the entrance to the bay the “Golden Gate.”

Thus began almost a century and a half of Presidio as U.S. Army post. The forests were planted, housing and other buildings constructed, and a community built around military necessity and human aesthetics. Its incredible amenities, not the least of which is the setting, made assignment to the Presidio a very highly sought-after army tour of duty. The *San Francisco Chronicle* quoted

Lieutenant General Glynn Mallory as saying, only half in jest, “It was said that an officer in the old Army had three ambitions: to make colonel, to be assigned to the Presidio, and to go to heaven.”

When the Base Closure and Realignment Commission added the Presidio to its 1989 list of military posts to be shuttered, a small portion of a large federal 1972 omnibus parks bill was brought to life. It stipulated that when the Department of Defense no longer needed the Presidio, the land would be transferred to the Department of the Interior for national park purposes. And so it was.

The army was given five years to wrap up its operations and turn the base over to the National Park Service (NPS), which began a four-year planning process in 1990. During that time, Congress carried on a lengthy debate about whether it could afford a national park whose estimated annual budget was one-and-a-half times larger than either Yellowstone’s or Yosemite’s.

As the NPS held workshops and vision sessions, Congress struggled with alternatives for funding the Presidio that ranged from full support to selling parts or all of it. By 1994, the long NPS planning process had yielded the *General Management Plan Amendment (GMP)*, and the legislation floating around Capitol Hill—with the newly elected, cost-cutting Republican Congress—contained a radical approach to funding this new entity.

The GMP, recognizing that this was a national park unlike any in the system, formulated a vision of the Presidio as “a dynamic setting for a network of institutions devoted to stimulating understanding of and action on the world’s most critical social, cultural, and environmental challenges.” It called for preservation and enhancement of the site’s significant cultural and natural resources, and outlined an environmentally responsible transportation strategy. An active, lively community of 2,000 residents would form the backbone of daily life at the Presidio; 4,800 jobs, an economic base. The GMP promoted the Presidio as a model of sustainable design, energy and water conservation, and waste reduction and recycling. Significantly, the plan called for a “federally

chartered partnership institution” holding authorities allowing the leasing of buildings and retention of revenues to “offset a major portion of the park’s annual operating budget.”

Focused on costs, Congress’ vision for the Presidio was much narrower than the GMP’s. What finally passed in 1996 was legislation mandating that the park become *completely* financially self-sufficient by 2013 or be returned to the General Services Administration (GSA) for disposal as surplus federal property. A public/private agency called the Presidio Trust was established to guide the process.

The bill, signed by President Clinton, outlined the partnership between The Presidio Trust and National Park Service, giving the coastline properties to the NPS to manage, and the remaining 80% of the lands, including all the Presidio’s buildings, to the Trust. A large component of the Presidio’s status as a national historic landmark, the buildings will need to be utilized to be preserved—in the cool, moist climate of San Francisco, unused, unheated buildings deteriorate rapidly.

No other national park operates under the knowledge that its federal funding will expire in a matter of years. The Trust estimates that it will need \$37 million a year (in 1998 dollars) to cover operating, maintenance, and infrastructure costs, an amount that does not include monies for public programming and other typical national park activities. While it has been granted authorities not given to other federal agencies, like revenue retention and exemption from government procurement laws, it has no powers of taxation. Its primary source of income, without government subsidy, is building leases.

With the GMP, the Trust, the NPS, the financial self-sufficiency mandate, and the park-loving public thrown into the same 1500-acre pot, the stew has become highly complex, requiring chefs with a keen sense of how to balance all the ingredients. “We hear from the dog walkers, the board sailors, the off-road cyclists, the native plant societies, and the historic preservation groups,”

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says Carey Feierabend, planning manager for the Trust. “Blending those is a challenge and always will be a challenge. We have to allow for change that is compatible [with the setting] while balancing the natural, cultural/historical, and recreational/scenic resources with the Trust’s mandate for financial self-sufficiency.”

Some interested parties think the Trust isn’t striking enough of a balance. The list of tenants that have been approved or are under consideration has given rise to charges that the Trust is commercializing the Presidio, losing sight of the vision of a global center for dealing with some of the world’s most critical problems. Further, with candidates like George Lucas, who is creating the Letterman Digital Arts Complex at the site of the former Letterman Hospital, and Robert Redford’s Sundance Film Centers, which is considering creating a multi-use facility for independent and international films in the Presidio Theatre, many local citizens feel that the Trust is selling out to glamorous clients at the expense of the Presidio’s identity as a national park.

“The reality is that this is a park, and the Trust’s mission, first and foremost, is to preserve it as part of the national park system,” says Jane Blackstone, deputy director of planning at the Trust. “The Letterman Complex project has gotten a lot of attention, and has eclipsed many of the other projects that have been ongoing for a long time—things like the Mountain Lake Restoration, the environmental sustainability initiatives of our facilities department, trails and bikeways planning. They’re all very natural-resource and park-oriented improvements that get less attention than the leasing initiative. That’s unfortunate, because those programs reinforce that the park’s preservation is our primary mission.”

Nicholas Weeks, senior landscape architect for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA—in which the Presidio sits) and 28-year veteran of the NPS, points out that the Trust is working with completely different assumptions than the NPS has been able to. “Our mandate and theirs are totally different. They have to lease out the Presidio in a fashion complementary to the

GGNRA's national park status AND make sure that it is zeroed out in 12½ years. We know many facilities in the national parks are albatrosses in terms of being able to keep them, but they're our heritage, they're beautiful, and everybody loves them, so we have to pump some money into them. People are willing to pay a little more for them because they aren't self-supporting. A private company wouldn't do that."

Leasing-initiative conflicts aside, the Presidio Trust and National Park Service are restoring pieces of the Presidio according to the environmental, cultural, community, and economic goals laid out in the GMP. Those goals, in fact, are driving some exciting design and planning solutions that are achieving an arguably successful and beautiful balance of competing interests.

Multiple influences are evident at the Thoreau Center for Sustainability, home now to some 50 "green" organizations, but formerly the original hospital complex at the Presidio. The new tenants wanted to replace the old-style English landscape with something less water-intensive, specifically a gravel and xeriscape motif.

Weeks says that the Park Service balked at the apparent rejection of the cultural landscape—ecological or not, the English-style gardens represented the heritage of this collection of buildings. "The reason this is a national historic landmark is because of its 200-year history of military occupation. If your goals are sustainability and education, let's talk about how people can learn from the landscape."

Juggling input from the Thoreau Center, Park Service, and a historical preservation officer, The Office of Cheryl Barton used the site's history as a framework for combining the cultural landscape with an ecologically sensitive plant palette. The designers sketched in the spatial arrangements of the previous campus with headers, walls, and hedgerows. Lush borders of lavender, rock rose, and Mexican bush sage ring fescue lawns. As it happened, south-facing courtyards with long-in-the-tooth evergreen trees became the pivotal issue in the cultural landscape/sustainability

discussion. Convincing the State Historic Preservation Office that trees could not be preserved like buildings could, and that the *idea* of trees was more important than the exact specimen, The Office of Cheryl Barton was able to replace the evergreens with deciduous trees, helping the energy efficiency of the buildings while maintaining a sense of the history of the space. The new design's modern interpretation of the site's cultural history recognizes the dynamic nature of landscape: that the evolution of cultures and landscapes is as important as their past.

History and environmental concerns were also not to be ignored at the golf course, a type of facility not known for its environmental friendliness. Arnold Palmer Golf Management Company worked with the Trust and NPS to institute progressive turf-management practices, install an irrigation system that will use reclaimed domestic water, and establish native plantings between the fairways. In addition, it built a new clubhouse that had to acknowledge the historic setting and address neighborhood concerns about architectural style and visibility, all while meeting the needs of golfers. A stunning public golf facility, one of the nicest in northern California, the Presidio golf course has managed to harmoniously weave the past into the present.

Not all of the Presidio's facilities have significant cultural histories, but the environmental sustainability platform is applied, regardless. At the Trust's maintenance complex, Building 1750 and its exterior spaces needed extensive renovation. They sit next to Lobos Creek Valley, an area that supports threatened and endangered plant species and happens to be both San Francisco's last free-flowing stream and the source of the Presidio's drinking water. Well-heeled, vocal neighbors that overlook the building were adamant that any restoration be attractive.

The landscape design paid close attention to the facility's setting next to the Pacific Ocean. In an attempt to mimic the dune environment, the soil was amended with clean sand and the sandy substrate irregularly mounded to replicate the topography of dune/scrub plant communities.

Installed during the rainy season to decrease mortality, the landscape should need minimal irrigation

for only three to five years. Perhaps most interesting is that the entire planting came from cuttings and seeds gathered in the vicinity of Building 1750 by volunteers in the Presidio Park Stewardship Program. The gathered material, propagated at the Presidio's Native Plant Nursery, yielded 30,000 truly native trees, shrubs and ground covers that were installed at the maintenance facility.

Sharon Farrell, NPS plant ecologist and founder of the Stewardship Program, cites Building 1750 as a good example of her community-based group's mission. "We remove invasive non-native species from the natural areas, grow plants in the Native Plant Nursery, monitor rare and endangered species. We've been very active in recreating, restoring and enhancing the natural areas in the Presidio."

In fact, the Stewardship Program draws numerous community volunteers and engages youth groups and corporations in seed gathering, germination tests, recording propagation information, searching the Presidio's abundant historical records, and maintaining the impressive Native Plant Nursery. Currently growing 60,000 plants of 100 different varieties, the nursery houses dune, wetland, and grassland plant communities—all native to the Presidio—among others. "Everything is gathered locally, within the Presidio or adjacent areas. Very few nurseries grow the types of plants that we're growing," Farrell says.

The Native Plant Nursery is also a model for the possible historic plant nursery. The Trust is currently performing a historic plant inventory, mapping existing plants in the designed cultural landscapes, and has found a small number of rare or unusual horticultural specimens. Plants like the subtropical vine, *Anredera cordifolia* (Madeira vine), *Cupressus macrocarpa* 'Lutea' (a variety of the omnipresent Monterey cypress), and *Eucalyptus ficifolia* 'Carmina' (a pink-flowered variety of the Red-flowering gum tree) are keeping inventory participants on their toes and in their Hortus. Specimens not readily available at commercial nurseries might be propagated on site in the future, much as the native plants are now.

The Stewardship Program will collaborate with the NPS, Trust and Golden Gate National Parks Association (a private non-profit that funds programs for the GGNRA) in the Mountain Lake Enhancement Plan, an effort to bring to life the only natural freshwater lake within the Presidio. In the past 200 years, human activities like the construction of Park Presidio Boulevard and natural contributions such as leaf litter from eucalyptus along the lake edge have contributed to siltation in Mountain Lake, decreasing its depth from an estimated twenty feet to nine feet. Water clarity is poor, and non-native plants have encroached on the water's edge. The restoration plan, which will be completed in the fall of 2000 and implemented in 2001, will take a three-pronged approach to improving water quality: the lake will be dredged three to six feet to improve water circulation, non-native species along the lake's shore will be replaced with primarily native plants that don't contribute leaf litter, and visitors will be restricted to designated trails and overlooks to minimize erosion along the lake edge.

To many the symbol of this new national park, the Presidio's forest is the subject of another restoration planning effort. Although the land was originally a kaleidoscope of dunes, marshes, creekside woodlands, sparse shrublands, chaparral, and meadows, it is today largely sylvan. The forest was planted in the late 19th century to provide shelter from the winds, stabilize blowing sand, and to impress upon local citizens that the army was there to stay. In 1883 Major William A. Jones, an army engineer, instituted a program that resulted in 450,000 trees being planted at the Presidio by the end of the century.

The forest is, in a word, old. Comprised primarily of Blue gum eucalyptus, Monterey pine and Monterey cypress, often planted in monocultural stands, its trees are entering a period of slowed growth and decline. A Vegetation Management Plan is in the works whose goal is to install sustainable, long-lived plants that require little maintenance and can be managed with more sensitivity to natural and cultural resources, and increased use of natural processes, all while

preserving the urban forest. The plan outlines management practices for three zones—native plant communities, the historic forest, and formal landscape vegetation.

The ultimate distribution of those three zones will be 28%, 21%, and 51%, respectively. Habitats for rare or endangered plant species will be protected, restored and monitored, and rare plants once found at the Presidio will be reintroduced. Honoring the elements that contribute to the Presidio’s historic landmark status, the plan recommends restoring forest boundaries and scenic vistas, preserving key stands of forest, and rehabilitating designed landscapes. Once again, the Presidio’s neighbors and fans have strong opinions and are watching the plan’s every suggestion. “There are neighbors who love the trees because they screen an objectionable view and neighbors who hate the trees because they block their view of the Golden Gate Bridge. We’ve had every opinion on that,” laughs Weeks, the plan’s project manager.

The GMP’s outline for waste reduction and recycling is being applied to many of the rehabilitated landscapes and buildings at the park, notably Crissy Field and the soon-to-be-developed Letterman Complex.

At Crissy Field, three-quarters of the concrete and asphalt removed to make way for a restored wetland designed by George Hargreaves was crushed and used in the material for the Presidio’s segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail. The Letterman Digital Arts Complex, currently being designed by George Lucas (who, though he’s the client, plays a strong role in his design projects), Lawrence Halprin, and Gensler Architects, will house five of George Lucas’ enterprises, including Industrial Light and Magic, on the site of the decrepit Letterman Army Medical Center. Rather than demolishing the existing buildings, the Trust will “deconstruct” them, reusing furniture and interior elements and recycling exterior materials. The plan is to use everything from the complex somewhere else at the Presidio.

As with the design and planning of any public space, no solutions adopted in this new national park will please everyone. The NPS and Presidio Trust find themselves working with a vocal, outdoorsy, environmentally conscious, place-proud community that notices and remarks upon their every move. Having a public/private partnership with a major financial mandate running a national park is a new model for everyone involved, and the outcome is as unpredictable as the stock market these days.

The question that naturally arises from this new approach is whether it is a harbinger of national park management to come—will more national parks be asked to become self-sufficient or be run by public/private agencies in conjunction with the NPS? Feierabend, who was a historical architect with the NPS and member of the GMP planning team before joining the Trust, says, “The Trust is very clear in saying that it shouldn’t be looked at as a model. It’s a very unique situation and set of circumstances. We’re right in the middle of San Francisco; what other national parks could really have a Presidio Trust for their administration?”

The Trust’s Craig Middleton, deputy director of government affairs, agrees with Feierabend that the Trust’s existence is facilitated by the unusual physical setting of this particular national park—in an urban area with millions of square feet of available building space. “Pieces of the Trust could be a model for other federal agencies, but not necessarily for the national parks,” he says.

If the Presidio Trust is not the model of the future for national park management, would some of the authorities granted the Trust—particularly the broader leasing powers, revenue retention, and exemption from government procurement laws—help the NPS and perhaps other government agencies in their own administrative practices? Or would extending those authorities open the door to the potential sacrifice of national treasures at the altar of the dollar?

It’s too early to tell how far this Trust/NPS arrangement will reach in federal agency administration. But in the meantime, many eyes will be on the Presidio as its governing body finds

ways to meet its congressional mandate while keeping the promise all the national parks make to the public.

With a note of hope for the doubters, Jane Blackstone observes, “We’re staying focused on the visitor experience here. Keeping our eye on the fact that it is a national park is a real challenge but it’s also the real motivation to do a wonderful job. All of us on staff would like to see that, in our old age, the Presidio is a place that we take our grandchildren to. We want it to become as iconic in the national park family as a Yellowstone or a Yosemite.”