

HAIGHT ASHBURY NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL

April 1, 2010

Joey Cain
President

Dear President Buell and Commissioners,

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The Recreation & Parks Department's current proposal to install an indoor/outdoor café on the site of the historic Stow Lake Boat House in Golden Gate Park has raised strong concerns on the part of the Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council (HANC) and that of the community at large. Stow Lake and its Boat House shelter have served for many decades as a quiet sanctuary where people of all ages and all walks of life come to retreat from the pressures of urban life. While RPD's stated objective in providing a café is to "enhance" the experience of lake visitors, it is difficult to understand how the addition of a substantial commercial establishment could be construed as an "improvement" of an area cherished specifically for its tranquility.

Of greatest concern to HANC is the lack of both transparency and specificity in RPD's development of its plans for the site. Although numerous Requests for Proposals have been issued (unsuccessfully) during the past year, the community's input on the project was only recently – and only after public demand at a December 2009 Commission meeting – sought. Since then, RPD has issued a new Request for Qualifications that includes no provisions or assurances regarding a long list of basic community concerns, e.g.:

- Have qualified preservationists been consulted to determine the status of the Boat House as an historic site? (Can the existing exterior, with only one small window, be legally altered or not? If not, how could a lakeside café succeed without large windows facing the lake?)
- Will a full Environmental Impact Report be undertaken to determine the true impacts of a café operation on surrounding flora, fauna, and people?
- How would the increase in traffic generated by this "destination café" – which RPD proposes to promote with increased advertising – be managed? (What guarantee does the community have that the existing parking lot would not be expanded in the future? Fundamentally, how can this deliberately increased traffic be seen as an "enhancement" rather than an infringement on current uses?)
- What is the true extent of necessary capital improvements to the building? (Has RPD ordered complete inspections by licensed professionals? Are written reports available for public review? We question how the operator of a purportedly small café could bring in sufficient revenue to support major capital improvements.)
- What restrictions would be placed on operating hours of the café? (Would nighttime operations be permitted, now or in the future? What guarantees does the community have that operations would not be expanded into nighttime hours, with associated bright lighting, thereby threatening wildlife and nesting birds in

particular? Disturbance of the Great Blue Heron colony on the island directly opposite the Boat House is especially worrisome.)

- Would the café operator be permitted to rent the new facility to private groups for parties, weddings, etc.? (If so, the attendant activity, noise and traffic would be highly disruptive to other lake users and wildlife.)
- What does the RFQ mean by “affordable food”? (How could a small café possibly be self-sustaining without a substantial increase in food prices at the lake? What assurances does the community have that a café would be equally attractive to people of all income levels?)
- Would alcohol sales be permitted at the café? (Are planned alcohol sales the reason RPD believes the new café would be self-sustaining? The dangers of providing beer and wine at this lakeside location are obvious and alarming.)
- How would the safety of lake visitors be assured if, as the RFQ proposes, boat operations are moved to the lower, parking-lot level and boats are moved to and from the lake on the paved access ramp now used heavily by visitors, including many seniors and disabled people? (This part of the proposal seems particularly violative of the existing Stow Lake aesthetics; antithetical to the preservation of a serene and safe environment; and perhaps likely to doom the viability of boat operations altogether.)

In sum, HANC takes particular note of the contradiction inherent in the RFQ’s objectives: to improve Stow Lake visitors’ experience of a uniquely peaceful area of Golden Gate Park by installing a new commercial establishment that is guaranteed – nay, designed – to draw increased crowds and traffic. Not only has there has been no public demand for a café at this site, but more than 1300 petition signatures to date have underscored the community’s opposition to the plan.

At the very least it is incumbent upon the Commission to ensure that the public’s growing confusions and concerns regarding this project are fully and openly addressed, and that a rigorous and public environmental review process is undertaken before any development proceeds. Until that time, HANC cannot support RPD’s ill-conceived and vague proposal.

Sincerely,

Joey Cain
 President
 Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council

cc: Phil Ginsburg, General Manager, Recreation & Parks Department
 Board of Supervisors, City and County of San Francisco
 Mayor Gavin Newsom
 Save Stow Lake Boathouse Coalition