

WHY GOLDEN GATE PARK SHOULD BE A LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT

The best qualities that Golden Gate Park embodies are timeless.

The Park is more than a collection of utilitarian functions and recreational activities – it offers a peaceful, bucolic and natural setting where people can participate in the social and solitary rites and activities that are an important part of our lives. To be able have a setting as beautiful as Golden Gate Park available to San Franciscans is a precious thing. The beauty and qualities that the Park brings to our lives is priceless and should not be turned into an organized and packaged experience.

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The Park was conceived of as a refuge from urban life, a refuge that could be enjoyed in a degree of relative comfort, but without every concession to comfort.

While there are comforts, there is a limit to the concessions made to comfort and nature is not entirely tamed in the Park: the meadows are not surrounded by benches, nor are they perfectly flat. While there are museums, playing fields and courts, for the most part people are expected to either be entertained by the contemplation of natural beauty or to bring one's own recreational amusements. While there are a few places to buy food, you are mostly expected to bring your own food and drink to most parts of the park, just as you would bring your own food to any real wilderness. This distinction, that this park is not an urbanized plaza in the sense that Union Square is, or an assembly of sports spaces such as the Joe DiMaggio Playground and Pool, is part of the Park's historic character and purpose.

Historic District Status is in harmony with the Golden Gate Master Plan.

The Master Plan calls for a “respect for the original design intent”, for the minimization of “the impacts that buildings and monuments have on the park landscape”, for the preservation of “open space of Golden Gate Park” and the maintenance and preservation of historic buildings and structures. Other policies speak to the preservation of the character of the varied woodlands and forested areas.

Certifying Golden Gate Park as a local historic district will not mean that the Park or Buildings couldn't change.

Historic District Status would require that proposed changes would be examined by the Historic Preservation Commission to see whether the change is being made in such a way that the historic features or qualities of the Park are not damaged. Often this is not a matter of there being a change in itself, it is a matter of the sensitivity with which a change is made. The Historic Preservation Commission is composed of members with professional qualifications for each seat on the Commission. This expertise will be brought to bear when changes to historic aspects and features of the Park are being considered.

This review process will protect the timeless qualities of the Park that San Franciscans for many generations have come to love and depend on, while still allowing for change. Historic District Status will ensure that any discussion of the merits of more intense use will have to be compared to the potential detriment to the historic purpose of the Park; the intent to make an open and natural landscape available to everyone in San Francisco.

Other urban Parks around the country have historic district or landscape status.

Griffith Park, MacArthur Park and Echo Park in Los Angeles have been designated Historic-Cultural Monuments. Central Park in New York has been designated a Historic Landscape. Washington Square Park and Alamo Square Park here in San Francisco have historic status designations. Historic status has not interfered with these parks' mission to serve the public.

Certifying Golden Gate Park as a local historic district will have economic and procedural benefits to San Francisco.

The Planning Department and the HPC are working with Recreation and Park staff to devise a process that will be responsive to the protection of historic resources yet at the same time be cost effective. Together they are working to define exactly those things that need to be reviewed and those that don't. Smaller and less sensitive issues can be handled on the staff level by the Planning Department; the HPC will only have hearings on those contemplated changes that have a broader impact or deal with sensitive resources. Having the HPC consider contemplated changes at an early stage of conceptual development will save the City a lot of money by ensuring that the changes are being done in an appropriate way at the start of the process making the costly disputes that have happened in the past less likely. If an entity such as the HPC had looked at the plans for the Music Concourse Garage early in the design stage, the process would have been a lot less contentious and less costly in time and money for everyone involved.

Golden Gate Park is not just empty space waiting to be filled with utilitarian structures.

Over the past two years members of the public have come to the Historic Preservation Commission to express their concerns about how projects in the Park are impacting the character of the Park and its historic resources. The HPC, by taking the step towards designation, is responding to these concerns. Proposals in the past to improve the Park have ranged from a plan to put the 1915 World's Fair in the Park, to plans to build freeways around and through it. Versions of the idea that the Park is empty space have persisted over the years, and from time to time the idea is put forward that the Park should be converted from a bucolic recreation area into a kind of amusement park or is a convenient site for a utilitarian structure is put forward.

As San Francisco's population and density of buildings increases, Golden Gate Park's natural setting will become its most precious asset.

Do your part to preserve the park! Please write in support of the Golden Gate Park Historic District

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Please also cc your letter to the Golden Gate Park Preservation Alliance: ggppa@earthlink.net