

Guardian of the Golden Gate

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FOR THOSE NOT FAMILIAR WITH THE PRESIDIO, let me begin with a few facts and a bit of history. The Presidio was established by Spanish colonists in 1776. Clearly recognizing the strategic importance of the harbor, later to become known as San Francisco Bay, the Spanish established a fort, or presidio, at its entrance. Nearly a century later, that entrance would be named the “Golden Gate.”

The Presidio stood sentinel at the Golden Gate for over two centuries, serving under the flags of three nations. When it closed as a military post in 1994, the Presidio had been the longest continuously operated military base in the nation. Over the centuries, the Presidio presided over the development of the American West and the extension of U.S. power into the Pacific area, including the birth and development of San Francisco as a great city of the West; the influx of people through the Golden Gate, during the California Gold Rush and subsequent waves of migration; and the establishment of California as a state, and the United States as a continental, then global, power. Throughout, the Presidio operated in a command role. Throughout, the Presidio exerted outsized influence relative to its small but strategically positioned 1,491-acre geographical presence.

In its most recent century, the Presidio stood sentinel as the urban environment of the San Francisco Bay Area developed quickly, particularly following World War II. It witnessed both the challenges that this rapid urbanization created, and some of the conservation activism and achievements that resulted as a reaction to this growth. It was here that a group of committed individuals reversed the destruction of San Francisco Bay, the largest estuary on the West Coast, and created the world’s largest national park in an urban area, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). Amy Meyer (2016) was a key player in that fight and ultimate victory.

As GGNRA was created and included in the national park system, a provision was inserted in its authorizing legislation that would prove fateful for the Presidio several decades later. The law required the Presidio to be included in the new park, if and when it were ever deemed to be in excess of the military’s needs. This was in 1972; in 1989, the Presidio landed on the first of several lists of bases to be closed. Five years later, it was transferred to the NPS for inclusion in the GGNRA.

It is here that the latest chapter in Presidio history begins. The story of the Presidio over the past 20 years is one of people joining to address myriad challenges, often in very innovative ways.

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Let me give you a glimpse of some of these challenges. The Presidio has six million square feet of buildings, nearly 500 of the 847 buildings are contributing structures to the national historic landmark district that comprises the entirety of the Presidio. In 1994, these buildings were in various states of disrepair. The infrastructure—roads, water lines, sewer, electrical and gas systems—was antiquated and suffered from a long period of deferred maintenance. As in most base closures, there were environmental remediation challenges, including ten landfills, leaking petroleum (heating oil) lines that crisscrossed the base, leaking fuel tanks, and lead and asbestos throughout.

A once-thriving natural environment, containing isolated remnants of the native habitat that had existed in this important ecological zone, was on life support, and needed immediate attention. The Presidio forest, itself the most significant contributor to the Presidio's landmark status, was in decline, with half of its approximately 70,000 trees at the end of their natural lifespans.

We figured at the time that we were facing the need for about \$2 billion in investment to get the Presidio back on its feet. But the budget provided by Congress, \$25 million a year (down from \$70 million that the Army spent on annual operations), and no construction budget, was completely inadequate for the task. We learned quickly that “color of money” matters. Seventy million dollars in the Defense budget is a drop in the bucket. The same amount of money in the NPS budget is a heavy lift, indeed. Congress, moving as it was in 1993–1994 toward fiscal austerity, began to question openly whether it should be bound by a single phrase in a 1972 parks bill. There were calls, resulting in a series of increasingly close votes, either to defund the Presidio (while keeping it as federal land), or simply to sell it.

If ever there was a time for an innovative solution, this was the time. We needed to get creative, and fast. What were the ingredients of a structure that could be successful?

We needed access to federal money and private money. We needed organizational flexibility, and a way of making the real estate assets (six million sq ft) generate funds to support park costs, while also preserving the historic buildings. We needed to protect the Presidio, its cultural and natural resources, while inviting outside investment. We needed independence from bureaucracy, while maintaining a strong and essential relationship with the NPS. This would be an entirely new way of managing a national park.

A group of prominent citizens, the “Presidio Council,” working closely with Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, went to Washington and made three promises: to save the Presidio as part of the national park system, while also making it financially independent; to rehabilitate buildings and infrastructure, protecting the national historic landmark district and conserving cultural and natural resources; and to welcome the public to the Presidio, and ensure that it always remains a public place.

Congress bought the concept. Pelosi introduced legislation with bipartisan support. The legislation passed in 1996, the trust was established in 1997, and we were provided jurisdiction over 80% of the Presidio in 1998.

Over the next fifteen years, the trust accomplished the following:

- invested in housing (1200 units) to generate early and reliable cash flow,
- leased 23 acres to George Lucas, and oversaw his development of the Letterman Digital Arts campus,
- took over cleanup responsibility from the Army (to ensure it would be done well and timely) in return for \$99 million and covered against overruns and surprises with \$100 million in environmental insurance,
- developed a partnership with the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy to raise money together that would fund key park improvements,
- grew an ever-increasing array of partnerships to insure our success in meeting our prom-

ised responsibilities,

- worked with Congress and others to obtain funding an agreement was struck that authorized annually-declining appropriations for 15 years, after which no additional annual funding would be provided, and
- worked hard to encourage the public to stick with us and to delay gratification while we focused on building revenue, reversing deterioration, upgrading infrastructure.

The trust was able to deliver on the first two promises. Financial self-sufficiency was achieved in 2013. The trust-managed portion of the Presidio no longer receives taxpayer support.

The trust is currently managing the largest and most dynamic historic preservation project in the nation. Over 400 historic buildings have been restored and are occupied and generating rent that is used directly for park operations and resource preservation. The historic forest is in the midst of a 50-year revitalization, numerous historic landscapes have been restored, plant and animal species are healthier now, and degraded water features (e.g., a sizable watershed, a freshwater lake) are being upgraded.

For every dollar of federal money received, the trust and its partners have attracted four dollars of private or philanthropic money. We are using some of the preservation financing techniques that Cherilyn Widell describes (2016) to leverage our limited resources.

The environmental cleanup was completed in May 2014. The price tag of \$176 million was covered almost entirely through a combination of the original \$99 million provided by the Army, earned interest, and insurance claims.

The trust and its partners have welcomed a new community to the Presidio, replacing a military community with a civilian community, comprising 3,000 residents, 4,000 employees of Presidio tenants, and an estimated 5 million visitor each year. In order to deliver fully on the third promise, to welcome the public, and contribute to their development and quality of life, the Presidio has developed a series of public-serving features that are intended to encourage people to come to the Presidio, make a military base more hospitable as a public park, and make it easier to navigate the site on foot or by bike. At the post's Main Parade, a parking lot was converted into a seven-acre public commons. The historic Officers' Club, with remnants of the oldest foundations in San Francisco, was restored and is now a public space, with a heritage gallery dedicated to the history of the Presidio, grand rooms for free public events, and classrooms that host a variety of youth-based programs. A former bachelor officers' quarters has been converted into the "Inn at the Presidio," the park's first overnight lodging facility. The trust has opened three new restaurants during the past year in a partnership with local chef, Traci des Jardins.

A network of trails and overlooks (24 miles of trails, 8 scenic overlooks) has been completed; and a newly-upgraded campground now serves 6,000 kids a year. All of this was built with funds raised by our partner organization, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

Having achieved the existential requirement of financial self-sufficiency (Congress mandated that failure to achieve that goal by 2013 would result in the sale of the Presidio), we are now building partnerships that we hope will extend the Presidio's reach beyond its borders, in keeping with the Presidio's legacy as a military base that was relatively small in size, but large in influence. At a historic fort atop coastal bluffs (Fort Scott), we have begun a partnership with the White House and others to create a center for cross-sector leadership, civic engagement, and service. We are also working with the NPS, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and other partners on a youth collaborative which aims to provide transformational programs for young people. We have committed to increasing the Presidio's outreach to veterans.

The keys to the Presidio's success in transforming a post into a park are the following:

- a willingness to try the unconventional,
- using all the tools available (tax credits, leasing authority, a generous community),
- an engaged community of Presidio supporters,
- bipartisan support in Congress,
- an agreement to take early money in return for a promise of self-sufficiency,
- an incredible place, amazing history and a one-of-a-kind location, and
- people like the others addressing this topic (Meyer 2016, Widell 2016, Arrow 2016, Reynolds 2016), creative, committed to a great public outcome, and willing to take risks.

The Presidio is a magnificent work in progress. It is truly a partnership park made possible by many people and many organizations. We are thankful for all that they do for parks and for the people who enjoy and learn from them.

References

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