

# SAN FRANCISCO BAY CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

50 California Street • Suite 2600 • San Francisco, California 94111 • (415) 352-3600 • Fax: (415) 352-3606 • www.bcdc.ca.gov

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**TO:** All Design Review Board Members

**FROM:** Will Travis, Executive Director [415/ 352-3653 [travis@bcdc.ca.gov](mailto:travis@bcdc.ca.gov)]  
Ming Yeung, Coastal Program Analyst [415/ 352-3616 [mingy@bcdc.ca.gov](mailto:mingy@bcdc.ca.gov)]

**SUBJECT: Exploratorium Relocation Project – Piers 15 and 17, City and County of San Francisco; Sixth Review**  
(For Board consideration on March 9, 2009)

## 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.

**Meeting Topics.** The March 9, 2009 meeting will focus on the project applicants' responses to the Design Review Board's previous comments on the following issues: (1) the courtyard and public access design and integration, including site furnishings and colors; (2) the Observatory building cladding material; and (3) the Embarcadero curb pull-outs and bus drop-off area. While not part of the Board's review at this time, the staff continues to work with the applicants on outstanding issues that include: (1) consistency of the project with the *San Francisco Waterfront Special Area Plan*; (2) public access; (3) proposed naval berthing along the east apron of the pier; (4) proposed vehicles along the south side of Pier 17; (5) Embarcadero promenade improvements; and (6) the project's resiliency to sea level rise.

**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.

**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 proposed project assumes the relocation of Baydelta Maritime to Pier 17.



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Under Phase 1, the project applicants would repair, renovate and seismically upgrade the Pier 15 substructure, shed and bulkhead building to house the Exploratorium's exhibits, restaurant, museum store, classrooms, theatre and administrative offices. The project applicants would remove a small office building within the valley and approximately 35,000 square feet of the 98,350-square-foot pile-supported deck that comprises the 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 would also remove the existing 27-foot-tall connector building at the east end of the valley and construct a new 32-foot-tall "Observatory" building that could link Pier 15 and Pier 17 in the future. The Observatory would house additional exhibits, a cafeteria, and be used for multi-purpose events. The project applicants are also proposing various curb pull-outs along the Embarcadero sidewalk in front of Piers 15 and 17 and the use of golf carts along the south side of Pier 17 to shuttle patrons to the east end of the piers.

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 would be constructed and ceremonial berthing and temporary berthing of naval vessels by the Port would remain along the east apron of Piers 15 and 17. Within Pier 17, the project applicants would improve 5,500 square feet of the shed for warehouse/ office space and repair the substructure and deck of the Pier 17 north apron in order to accommodate the relocation of Baydelta Maritime's tug and tow operations. 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. Under Phase 1, the Exploratorium would continue to sublease Pier 17 to various commercial, maritime, and light industrial users and occupy approximately 20,000 square feet for museum support space. The Exploratorium may also request proposals for a 5,000-square-foot retail use at Pier 17.

Under Phase 2, the Exploratorium would renovate and seismically upgrade the Pier 17 substructure and shed to expand its museum program into the entire 110,615-square-foot area. The public access pathway along the south side of Pier 17 would be widened with a deck extension and a bridge would be constructed on the second floor of the Observatory Building to connect Piers 15 and 17. The staff has requested that the applicants provide more detail on the work proposed under Phase 2.

**Prior Board Review and Comments.** The Design Review Board (Board) has reviewed this project at five prior meetings.

1. **First Review.** During the first review of the project on January 7, 2008, the Board commented on the Embarcadero curb pull-outs and bus drop-off area, use of trees along the Embarcadero, the design of the courtyard, view impacts, circulation around the project site and the incorporation of boats and research vessels into the public access design.
2. **Second Review.** At the second meeting on March 10, 2008, the applicants returned with their responses to the Board's comments on the Embarcadero curb pull-outs and bus drop-off area. The Board made additional comments on this issue and requested that the applicants return with further revisions.
3. **Third Review.** On May 5, 2008, the project applicants presented their responses to the Board's remaining five comments raised at the January 7, 2008 meeting (first review), including the use of trees along the Embarcadero, the courtyard, view impacts, circulation, and the

incorporation of boats and research vessels. The Board commented on aspects of the Observatory building (formerly known as the “bridge building”), circulation around the proposed project site, the mooring of ships along the east end of the Pier, the placement of the seismic joint along Pier 15, and asked for more detail on proposed Phase 2 of the project.

4. **Fourth Review.** On September 8, 2008, the applicants returned to the Board and presented a revised public access plan and design for the “courtyard” based on a renegotiated lease with the Port for Piers 15 and 17 during Phase I. At that meeting, the applicants also presented their responses to the prior Board comments on the Embarcadero curb pull-outs and the issues raised at the May 5, 2008 meeting (third review). The Board requested further detail and revisions on the Embarcadero curb pull-outs, and commented on the Observatory building, the courtyard site furnishings, the mechanical enclosure at the southwest apron, and the mooring of ships along the east apron.
5. **Fifth Review.** On November 10, 2008, the applicants presented their responses to the Board’s comments on the Observatory building cladding material, the courtyard site furnishings, including benches, bike racks, trashcans, and railings, and the mechanical enclosure at the southwest apron. The Board questioned the use of the corten steel on the Observatory building, requested that more benches in various styles be added, asked for more detail on the mechanical enclosure, and asked that the applicants present an integrated design program for the courtyard and public access areas to explain the overall idea, style and program for the site.

The following are the Board’s prior comments on the topics that will be discussed at the March 9, 2009 meeting and the applicants’ response. The Board’s advice is sought on whether the applicants’ responses address the Board’s concerns.

***Prior Board Comment on the Courtyard and Public Access Design and Integration.*** *At the last Board meeting, the applicants presented the proposed site furnishings for the courtyard, including the placement of benches, bike racks, trashcans, railings, exhibits, signage and paving material and colors. The Board asked the applicants to consider placing more benches at the site, particularly along the south apron of Pier 15, and more bench styles, including benches with backs. The Board also asked to see laser cut detail on the mechanical enclosure located at the southwest apron. The Board recommended a sense of cohesiveness for all the proposed site furnishings, materials, and colors, and requested that the applicants return to explain the Exploratorium’s overall idea, style and program for the site, including how the site furnishings would be related to one another and with the site (Bay, water, history).*

**Applicants’ Response:** (See pages 2 – 33 of the applicants’ booklet). The applicants have prepared exhibits to showcase the overall program and theme of the Exploratorium experience, from the Embarcadero approach, through the bulkhead entrance, bayside history walk and entry plaza, and around the courtyard, along the east and south apron of Pier 15 (see pages 10 – 23). According to the applicants, “the architecture and the site features pay homage to the historic context and Exploratorium program with elegant design elements that support museum program and serves as a backdrop to the historic resource of Piers 15/ 17, the people, and exhibits of this important waterfront precinct.” The site guardrails, Observatory guardrails, interior mullions and concrete slabs are united within the same hue, with slight color variations to add subtle accent and provide differentiation of the various components of the design (see pages 24 - 29). The applicants state that the chosen hue is extracted from the unique color of the Bay water when viewed obliquely and that the intention is for the guardrails and the general floor plan to interact with the Bay color at different times of the day, depending on location, sun intensity, orientation and vantage point.

The applicants have added five benches along the south apron of Pier 15 and have added some benches with backs, in response to the Board's recommendation (see pages 32 – 33). The mechanical enclosure at the southwest apron has been designed with a circuit pattern to subtly evoke what is housed behind the gates (see page 31). According to the applicants, the color of the generator enclosure complements the existing concrete wall of Pier 15. The applicants have developed more detail on the gate proposed at the north apron of Pier 15, the entry point into the ticketed outdoor area (see page 30). During operating hours, the large steel gates would open up to allow views into the ticketed outdoor area through lower exit gates.

***Prior Board Comment on the Observatory Building Cladding Material.*** *The Board questioned the use of corten steel on the Observatory building and asked to see an overall color palette review. The Board was also concerned about the glass railing on top of the Observatory building and wanted to ensure that the railing would be comfortable for public access and not susceptible to bird strikes.*

**Applicants' Response:** (See pages 18 - 19 and 24 – 29 of the applicants' booklet). The applicants have removed corten steel from the cladding on the Observatory building. The Observatory building's primary cladding will be insulated glass units with structural silicon joints to "maximize light penetration through its narrow floor plate and to provide panoramic views from within." According to the applicants, "the new glass is partially fritted to enhance building energy performance and to decrease reflectivity to minimize bird hazards. The upper guardrail [on top of the Observatory building] will be an extension of the curtain wall system and fritted as well to decrease reflectivity." (See page 28). The more solid component of the Observatory building will be clad in pre-cast concrete, inspired by the panels found on Pier 15. The color of the pre-cast concrete has been chosen to differentiate the new building from the historic components of the existing shed walls (see page 27). Above the pre-cast concrete along the north façade of the Observatory building, a vertical steel picket would be installed to "reveal the movements of museum visitors and exhibiting skylight." (See page 19). The vertical steel picket would be painted the same hue as the proposed project guardrails. The applicants will bring both colored concrete and glass samples to the meeting.

***Prior Board Comment on the Embarcadero Curb Pull-outs and Bus Drop-off Areas.*** *The Board last discussed the Embarcadero curb pull-outs and bus drop-off areas at its meeting on September 8, 2008. At that meeting, the Board recommended that the passenger car pull-out in front of Pier 15 be moved south of the pier, towards the marginal wharf and that the art ribbon be lowered.*

**Applicants' Response:** (See pages 34 – 35 of the applicants' booklet). The applicants state that they are aware of the Board's concerns that the location and length of the passenger car drop-off in front of Pier 15 may impact bicyclists traveling in the northbound bicycle lane and pedestrians walking along Herb Caen Way. However, the applicants state that it is of paramount importance to the Exploratorium to safely and conveniently unload passengers who may otherwise find it difficult to access the site from a distance. According to the applicants' consultants, they have found no evidence that narrowing the sidewalk will pose more congestion than would have existed with the current curb indent. To address bicyclists' concerns, the applicants propose to re-stripe the inside bike lane and to include a strip of bollards to physically separate the curb indent from the bicycle lane as an additional safety measure for the bicycles on the Embarcadero. The bollards will limit vehicles to one way in and out of the indent and allow bicyclists to know where cars might cross over. According to the applicants, the bollards will be flexible per the Municipal Transportation Authority's (MTA) guidelines to allow emergency vehicles to drive over them. The

applicants will also paint bicycle stencils and provide all requisite warning signage ahead of the indents. (An exhibit illustrating this proposal has not been included in the booklet).