



San Francisco Public Library

100 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102

July 9, 2009

Charles Edwin Chase, AIA
President
Historic Preservation Commission
1650 Mission Street, Suite 400
San Francisco, CA 94103

Dear President Chase:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an overview of the Branch Library Improvement program (BLIP) to the Historic Preservation Commission. This letter is a response to the request by the Commissioners for more information about the BLIP program, the City Planning review process and specific updates on the Ortega, Merced, Park, and North Beach projects.

As discussed in the Library's presentation, the program priorities for the BLIP are to reduce seismic risk, comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, meet modern technological needs and current code requirements, and provide spaces that are responsive to current services, yet flexible enough to meet future needs. We have a comprehensive community engagement process for each branch that includes numerous public meetings in the community, a Peer Review before the Library Commission early in the design process, and continuous project updates which are disseminated at each branch, on our website, and at neighborhood events.

For the environmental evaluation of each of our branches, we have followed the direction of the Planning Department. In September 2008, we met with the Director and his Major Environmental Analysis and Historic Preservation staff to review upcoming projects and procedures. For each project, we have submitted requested plans and information, held subsequent meetings with Planning Department staff, and conducted tours of the branches as needed.

The following is a summary of the scope, CEQA review, and community participation for the Park, Ortega, Merced and North Beach projects.

- The Park Branch, located at 1833 Page Street, was renovated in the early 1990's. During this period, the basement was remodeled to include a meeting room and a crafts room. Seismic retrofitting, electrical upgrades, asbestos abatement and the installation of an elevator for handicapped access were also completed. Under the BLIP, the scope of the project is primarily an interior remodel with upgrades to the heating system, plumbing, electrical, lighting, and data systems.

In 2002, a Categorical Exemption was issued for the renovation of the branch. In May 2009, a Preservation Planner reviewed the current plans and in June 2009, approved the permit set of drawings. The branch is scheduled to close for renovation in October 2009.

The community has actively participated in the design of the Park project. In May 2007, a survey was conducted where 600 people gave their opinion about materials, facilities, and services at the branch. Four community meetings took place at the branch to discuss designs (July 2008, January 22 and 27, 2009, and March 16, 2009). In February 2009, the Library Commission held a Peer Review where Gita Dev, FAIA, an independent architect and a library professional, publicly reviewed the design. In addition, meetings were held with the Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council and other neighborhood groups to receive their input. As a result of the Peer Review and public comment, significant changes were made to the plans to better preserve the integrity of the building's interior.

- The Ortega Branch, located at 3223 Ortega Street, will be replaced with a new library building on the existing site. Located adjacent to the largest middle school in San Francisco, an elementary school, a playground, and a recreation center, the library is filled beyond capacity with children and teens. The current lack of direct visibility from the street results in ongoing vandalism and safety issues. Though originally slated for a renovation, the Library Commission determined the need to build a new facility because of increased service needs from adjacent schools, the need for improved visibility and access, strong community support for a new branch, and the difficulty meeting the service needs with a renovation. The new branch will almost double the size of the current facility, be located closer to Ortega Street, include a much needed program room and will be LEED certified.

In 2003, a Categorical Exemption was issued for demolition and new construction. In October 2008, Planning Department preservation staff again reviewed the project and toured the site, determined that the existing branch did not appear to be an historic resource for the purposes of CEQA, and issued another Categorical Exemption. The ground breaking ceremony took place on June 19, 2009 and the new branch is scheduled to open in early 2011.

The community has been pressing for a large, visible branch library since 2003. As part of a state grant application, a community needs assessment was conducted that included interviews with community stakeholders about materials, facilities, and services and a community survey analysis. Four community meetings were held (September 2003, October 2003, January 2008, and July 2008) to discuss services and designs. The Library Commission held a public Peer Review in February 2008 where an independent architect and library professional reviewed the design. In February 2009, because the project is located in the West Sunset Playground, the Recreation and Parks Commission approved the plans at a publicly noticed meeting. In addition, as part of the attempt to secure a state grant, hundreds of Sunset district neighbors wrote postcards and letters of support for a new library.

- The Merced Branch, located at 155 Winston Drive, will be renovated and expanded. The renovation priorities include making the branch seismically safe, fully accessible, and technologically updated. The building has a seismic hazard rating of 3, with 4 being the most hazardous. Both the public and staff areas will become more functional and the children's room will double in size. Because of site constraints, there were only two options for an addition - either near the front entrance or over the back courtyard. The courtyard is heavily used for programming, beloved by the community and a character defining feature of the branch; therefore the addition was placed near the entrance.

In 2002, a Categorical Exemption was issued for the renovation of the branch. In June 2009, after review and a site tour by a preservation planner, the Planning Department issued a Historic Resource Evaluation Response which determined that the branch appears to be an historical resource for the purposes of CEQA. They further concluded that although the proposed renovation does not appear to be consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, it does not appear that the project would result in a significant adverse impact. Subsequently, the Planning Department issued a new Categorical Exemption. The branch closed for renovation on June 6, 2009 and is scheduled to reopen fall 2010.

The community has been involved in the design for the Merced library since late 2005, where 700 people participated in a survey about materials, facilities, and services. Community meetings were held at the branch (May 2006 and February 2008) to solicit design ideas, discuss survey results and service priorities, and review designs. In March 2008, the Library Commission held a public Peer Review where Robert Colyer, an independent architect and a library professional, reviewed the design.

- The North Beach Branch, located at 2000 Mason Street, will be demolished and rebuilt on the triangle lot bound by Lombard, Mason, and Columbus. The new branch will be approximately 65% larger and will include an upstairs program room with after hours access for community meetings, poetry readings, author receptions, children's programs, and more. The new location will be seismically safe and fully accessible. The current building has a seismic hazard rating of 3, with 4 being the most hazardous. It will feature a new designated teen area, an adult reading area, an expanded children's area with interactive learning features, and materials in international languages. By relocating the library, the new park can be made larger and the playground, tennis and bocce courts can be rearranged to make a unified park, easy to walk through, accessible and safe. The library studied renovating the existing building, but found that meeting building codes would result in less usable library space than the current branch provides and that an expansion would displace existing Park amenities. Renovation would not allow the Library to meet the stated needs of the community or the long-term needs of the park.

The Planning Department is conducting a full Environmental Impact Report for the North Beach project including a transportation study, a Historic Resource Report by Carey and Co. and detailed preservation alternatives for the existing branch. The Notice of Preparation was issued in April 2009 with comments due May 29, 2009. The draft EIR is scheduled to be released in early 2010.

Plans for the new library and expanded park are the result of input from hundreds of community residents. Since May 2008, the Library and its partner, the Recreation and Park Department, have held five public meetings regarding the North Beach Branch Library and Joe DiMaggio Playground. The Library Commission reviewed the location and design of the branch at public meetings on September 4, 2008 and June 4, 2009. The Recreation and Park Commission also reviewed the placement of the branch and Park plan in a public hearing on September 18, 2008. In addition, the Library Commission held a public Peer Review in June 2009 where Craig Hartman, FAIA and a library professional reviewed the design for the new branch.

Enclosed with this letter is a copy of Chapter 9.1 (Design Guidelines for Carnegie Library – Historical Rehabilitation Issues) and Exhibit 1 (Landmark Nomination: Carnegie Branch Libraries) of the Branch Facilities Plan that was developed for the BLIP Program. These elements of the plan provide a significant amount of information regarding the preservation and landmark aspects associated with the Branch Library Improvement Program. We welcome the opportunity to present a more in-depth overview at a later date of the entirety of the BLIP program including our landmark Carnegie libraries, the modern era branches, and our ongoing historic preservation efforts. At that time we will also provide more detail about some of the key professionals that have guided our work as well as the recognition that the Library and the Department of Public Works have received for the BLIP program.

With close to a decade of planning and execution behind the Branch Library Improvement Program (BLIP), it is difficult to convey in one letter the plethora of details regarding the thoughtful consideration each of the branches has been given with regard to preservation. The linchpin issue for the Library has always been balancing preservation and restoration with seismic safety and accessibility. San Francisco's public libraries have evolved, like many public spaces, into community anchors in the city's distinct neighborhoods. In many cases they abut schools and parks. Just as those facilities have had to upgrade to meet new expectations and demands for usage, so has the Library. We take pride in the work we have done to maintain San Francisco's legacy while fulfilling the voter's direction for safe, modern libraries that can foster life-long learning and literacy for many decades to come.

If you would like additional information about the Branch Library Improvement Program or any of our branches, please do not hesitate to contact me at 415-557-4236.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Luis Herrera".

Luis Herrera
City Librarian

Enclosures

Cc: Jewelle Gomez, President, Library Commission
Ed Reiskin, Director, Department of Public Works
John Rahaim, Director, Planning Department