



*Letter from Woodstock*  
Rolf Diamant

## The Presidio Matters

A FEW YEARS AGO, I suggested at a regional superintendents' meeting that US national parks were facing a paradoxical future. This was, I said, an era of unprecedented changes and challenges but also, in many ways, a golden age for the National Park Service (NPS)—as it was an organization becoming more sophisticated, focused, and better trained than it has ever been in the past. More than a few of my colleagues in the room did not agree with this assessment or at least objected to my choice of words as they complained about their operating budget shortfalls, staffing vacancies, various bureaucratic obstacles, and workloads. I couldn't disagree with any of that—as a superintendent, I was working through similar problems in my own park—but I thought we should recognize that the park system was still growing in many positive directions. Park superintendents, overall, were becoming more emotionally intelligent and adept at dealing with complexity. New, more inclusive, and successful community engagement strategies were being developed. Partners were increasingly more nimble and capable and across the park system pockets of useful experimentation and innovation were able to flourish.

In my sixth "Letter from Woodstock," I will take a closer look at one of those nodes of useful experimentation and innovation, the Presidio of San Francisco. The 1,500-acre former military post is national parkland managed jointly by the federally chartered Presidio Trust and NPS, nested within the much larger Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The trust manages about 80% of the Presidio (most historic buildings); NPS is responsible for the other 20% (mostly shoreline property around Crissy Field) and has legislative authorization to provide interpretive services, visitor orientation, and educational programs throughout the Presidio in cooperation with the trust. (For the record, I worked for Golden Gate about 35 years ago on its first general management plan and I still keep up a membership in the Golden

---

*The George Wright Forum*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 225–229 (2013).

© 2013 The George Wright Society. All rights reserved.

(No copyright is claimed for previously published material reprinted herein.)

ISSN 0732-4715. Please direct all permissions requests to [info@georgewright.org](mailto:info@georgewright.org).

Gate National Parks Conservancy, the nonprofit partner that supports and assists the Golden Gate National Parks.)

Congress established the trust in 1996 as an independent government corporation with a mandate to manage the Presidio, find new uses for its nearly 800 structures (5.9 million square feet of useable space), and become financially self-sufficient within 15 years—a milestone that the trust reports it has now achieved. By any measure the Presidio represents one of the most ambitious experiments in public park-making, urban design, and multi-sector cooperation anywhere in the world. There have been base closures and transitions in other places, but given the distinctive nature of the Presidio, with its vast number of historic structures (over 400), its storied cultural landscape, and the immense urban infrastructure associated with it all, the scale of this undertaking is profoundly different and consequential.

The metrics of Presidio's ongoing transformation are impressive by any measure. Today much of the residential and non-residential property in the Presidio has been renovated, leased, or rented, and 7,000 people live or work in a spectacular national park setting that attracts, according to the trust, approximately 5 million visitors annually. Three hundred-fifty historic buildings have been renovated, housing thousands of residents and some 225 organizations. The Presidio has been called the largest historic preservation project in the country and it probably is.

On a recent visit to the Presidio, I also saw stream restoration and reforestation projects, a newly built system of pedestrian and bike trails, an urban campground, and several spectacular scenic overlooks. The Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy has been the trust's principal nonprofit partner for much of this impressive park development. I think it is safe to say that the scale and pace of this transformation is without precedent in the modern national park system.

So what can be learned from the Presidio at this point in time? While many of Presidio Trust's circumstances and authorities are unique and cannot be easily replicated or adapted, I would direct attention to at least three developments that may have broader application:

- *The Presidio is demonstrating approaches to sustainable city living and sustainable park design, and the two can be merged to offer new ideas for adaptation and resiliency.* One noteworthy example is the revitalization of the 36-acre Presidio Public Health Service District, including the rehabilitation of a derelict six-story hospital and adjacent campus buildings for rental housing, office space, and a school. Through environmental remediation and by adding new walking trails and overlooks, the Public Health Service District has also further enhanced the national park values of the Presidio. This neighborhood has come back to life with help of NPS-administered preservation tax credits and is the first historic landmark property to be certified by the US Green Building Council as “LEED for Neighborhood Development” for “smart growth, urbanism and green building.”
- *There is an opportunity at the Presidio to evaluate the reciprocal benefits of private and public investments.* Repopulating the Presidio with people who live and work there along with shared neighborhood amenities (such as landscaping, public seating, cafés, and shops) encourages expanded recreational use as the public perceives the Presidio

as a lively, attractive, and safe environment. Similarly, the public projects (such as natural area restoration, bikeways, and overlooks) enhance the Presidio as a desirable place to live and work.

- *The governance model of the Presidio Trust has both strengths and weaknesses. While much can be learned from how the trust carries out its work, particular attention needs to be focused on its relationship with NPS and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.* In the absence of a more structured partnership codified by statute (such as having Golden Gate National Recreation Area formally represented on the trust's board of directors), the partnership's success depends a great deal on leadership, personality, and good will. It would be instructive to better understand what confidence-building measures and other tools can be used to strengthen and periodically refresh the level of trust, cooperation, and shared vision essential to the health and robustness of the partnership.

The relationship has not always been an easy one between the trust and NPS, particularly in the early years. NPS and park advocates were unhappy with the 1996 Presidio Trust Act that had the trust report to Congress and the Office of Management and Budget. NPS would be consulted, but would have no direct oversight. There were further worries that the congressional mandate for the Presidio to be financially self-sustaining in 15 years might later be applied to other parks in the system. And finally, there was the fear of an even more troubling potential precedent: the reversion section in the act (which would only be invoked if the trust failed) would transfer trust-managed property, not to NPS, but to the General Services Administration, to be withdrawn from Golden Gate National Recreation Area and sold. Beyond misgivings about the legislation, NPS may have been uneasy about the broad authorities granted to the trust by Congress and the trust's early focus on the real-estate side of its mission. Even today the Presidio is featured on the NPS home page, but curiously there is no mention of the Presidio Trust or link to its programs. For its part, the trust had plenty of trouble finding its own footing in the relationship. Looking at the trust's annual report released ten years ago, the only collaborative projects with NPS and the conservancy appear to have been water monitoring and songbird inventories. Not so now: this year's annual report credits the Presidio's success to "a strong collaboration" with NPS and the conservancy, the "principal organizational partners" of the trust.

This shift in tone reflects a maturing partnership. But I suspect that the conservancy has also played an outsized role in facilitating more mutually beneficial cooperation. Serving as the non-profit partner and cooperating association for both the Presidio Trust and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the conservancy has raised and invested substantial resources in a seamless network of new trails, overlooks, and other world-class visitor and educational facilities shared by both. Both NPS and the trust had a major stake in the outcome of the conservancy's hugely successful rescue and revitalization of Crissy Field, and likewise both will share in the many benefits to be derived from the recent gift of \$25 million from the S.D. Bechtel, Jr., Foundation to the conservancy. These funds will create 10 acres of parkland over a newly buried roadway, connecting the Presidio's historic Main Post with Crissy Field's marsh and waterfront. The gift will also expand the activities of the Crissy

Field Center serving both the park and Presidio as “a nationally recognized program hub for youth engagement in environmental learning and community betterment.” Reflecting the spirit of this cooperation, more and more signs are appearing bearing the logo of all three organizations—perhaps a modest but symbolic indicator of a new willingness to co-brand and share credit for the enormous transformation that is occurring.

The ultimate success of the Presidio, however, will be largely determined by attaining and holding on to what I call the “sweet spot” in the Presidio Trust’s delicate balancing act of maintaining financial health while continuing to make the Presidio accessible and welcoming to the public, including people from diverse and underserved communities around the Bay Area. Success will also be determined by the trust’s commitment to building a new kind of national park that has, as stated in its mission, “broad relevance” to the larger world and invests in such purposes as “environmental learning and community betterment.” The “sweet spot” is realized when there is a clear alignment of goals and where the enactment of each part of the Presidio’s mission strengthens and adds value to the other parts. However, this is never going to be easy or non-controversial.

A case in point is the trust’s request for proposals (RFP) for the “Mid-Crissy” area of the Presidio to establish a “cultural institution of international distinction.” The project would repurpose the former post commissary site and utilize the newly created parkland connecting the Main Post to Crissy Field. The site, with its commanding views of the Golden Gate, is the Presidio’s keystone. Whatever is built, according to the RFP’s guidelines, must “integrate well with plans for Crissy Field and the Main Post” and “welcome a broad cross-section of the community in a manner that reflects and reaffirms the public nature of the Presidio.”

One of the two leading contenders in the RFP process has been film director George Lucas, who is proposing to construct the “Lucas Cultural Arts Museum,” a 93,000-square-foot building “highlighting populist art from some of the great illustrators of the last 150 years through today’s digital art.” In an interim review of the proposals, the trust praised the generosity of George Lucas, who has offered to pay for and endow the museum with his own funds, and noted the broad appeal of the museum’s educational opportunities. The trust raised serious concerns, however, over the proposed Lucas museum’s “massing and height and its architectural style design” which the urban design critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle* has described as “boilerplate Beaux Arts, ornamentation without imagination.” The trust also questioned the degree to which the Lucas museum would stand apart from its national park environment, not creating the “programmatic connections that would add value to other park programs throughout the Presidio.”

The other leading RFP contender is the trust’s own partner, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy. The conservancy has proposed building a “Presidio Exchange,” a “park-based cultural center that creates, curates, and hosts unique public experiences at the Presidio ... that are Presidio-themed, participatory, and cross-disciplinary.” The Exchange is designed as a highly versatile performance and learning venue, taking cues from some of the nation’s newest and most successful cultural spaces, such as New York City’s Highline Park and Chicago’s Millennium Park.

In their interim review, the trust recognized the conservancy’s exceptional contributions to the Presidio and throughout Golden Gate National Recreation Area and especially its

“ethos of partnership in the public interest.” The trust commended the conservancy’s approach to the Exchange as “varied, flexible and relevant” but asked for a clearer “master narrative” and more information on public programming.

When all is said and done, the conservancy is offering the Presidio a remarkable opportunity. There are many parts that make up the new Presidio—emerging neighborhoods, distinctive campuses, and newly preserved landscapes. The Exchange would significantly enhance the Presidio’s overall visibility and coherence as a great public park. Building on all the good work that has already been accomplished, the Exchange has the potential, as well, to position the Presidio in the vanguard of a 21st-century national park system that is working to become more inclusive, more collaborative, and more relevant.

The decision on this RFP will not be the first time the Presidio Trust has had to seek out that “sweet spot” under intense scrutiny and political pressure, nor will it be the last. With the challenge of self-sufficiency now met, however, it will be a bellwether test of the trust’s fidelity to its public mission and will do much to shape the ultimate contours of the Presidio’s character as a national park.

Given the magnitude and breath of this remarkable 15-year transition from “post to park,” and the many important choices still to be made, I think it is time to give the Presidio greater recognition as a valuable part of our national park system.

A great urban national park laboratory has been created at the Presidio for perfecting sustainable practices in environmental remediation and recovery, historic preservation, and park design. Just as importantly, the Presidio is also an opportunity to experiment with new approaches to partnership, community-building, and civic stewardship. We should take advantage of all that can be learned, particularly the positive interaction of what we have too often chosen to segregate: nature and culture, public and private, recreation and work, urban and open spaces.

It is time to pay more attention.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Roy Dannant". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.