

Daniel Lurie, Mayor



Kat Anderson, Commission President
Philip A. Ginsburg, General Manager

August 18, 2025

Chuck Collins, President
San Francisco Arts Commission
401 Van Ness Ave., #325
San Francisco, CA 94102

Ralph Remington, Director of Cultural Affairs
San Francisco Arts Commission
401 Van Ness Ave., #325
San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear President Collins and Director Remington,

We write to share an update and respectfully request your partnership in addressing a critical design challenge in the Embarcadero Plaza and Sue Bierman Park project, an ambitious effort to reimagine five acres of waterfront parkland into a resilient, inclusive, and actively programmed public space that serves both citywide and neighborhood needs.

Design Vision: Connecting City and Bay

Now in the planning phase, the project aims to unify Embarcadero Plaza and Sue Bierman Park into a seamless public realm that reengages our waterfront and reconnects the City to the Bay. The design envisions:

- A flexible civic plaza for large-scale public gatherings
- Shaded seating areas, picnic nodes, and accessible circulation routes
- Thoughtful landscaping and integrated stormwater features
- Park improvements to strengthen pedestrian access and neighborhood connectivity

Community feedback collected during two public meetings has been strongly supportive, emphasizing the importance of honoring the site's layered history while ensuring the space is vibrant and welcoming every day of the week. We received positive feedback for the community's desires for a central gathering lawn, inclusive amenities, and strong connections between the park, plaza, and waterfront.

A Design Constraint: Vaillancourt Fountain

To achieve this vision, we must address a critical constraint: the Vaillancourt Fountain. As a part of the Civic Art Collection and under the jurisdiction of the Arts Commission, any proposed change requires your review and approval.



Designed by Armand Vaillancourt and opened in 1972 as part of Lawrence Halprin's Embarcadero Plaza, the fountain is a Brutalist work constructed of textured, precast concrete tubes arranged in chaotic angles. It was conceived to convey dynamic energy and to mask the din of the now-removed Embarcadero Freeway with the sound of water. In its original context, it was a compelling and radical work of public art.

However, the physical, environmental, and spatial conditions of Embarcadero Plaza have changed dramatically over the past half-century. What was once a statement piece of urban renewal now severely limits our ability to create a safe, functional, and future-ready civic space.

Design Conflicts and Spatial Limitations

The current location, scale, and orientation of the fountain fragment the plaza, hinder sightlines, and constrain circulation and event programming. The design team has struggled to resolve the conflict between the large footprint of the fountain and the project's key design objectives:

- Activating a unified plaza and park
- Opening visual and physical connections to the Bay
- Creating flexible space for civic life, events, and everyday use

The scale of the fountain is incompatible with the open lawn and gathering spaces envisioned in the new design. Simply put, the design cannot meet community needs or project goals while retaining the fountain in place.

Technical Evaluation and Public Safety

In June 2025, Page & Turnbull completed a Conditions Assessment of the fountain. The findings are alarming and underscore why the fountain is no longer viable as a functional or safe public asset:

Structural Instability and Seismic Risk

- Widespread corrosion in embedded steel and loss of a post-tensioning rod
- Structural modeling confirms non-compliance with seismic design standards
- Potential for localized failure or total collapse in a major earthquake

Environmental and Public Health Hazards

- Presence of lead-based paint and asbestos in numerous structural components
- Non-compliant underground pump vault with serious safety concerns
- Interim use would require costly environmental monitoring and physical barriers

Accessibility Barriers

- No ADA-compliant access to platforms or viewing areas
- Steppingstones, stairs, and guardrails are unusable or hazardous
- Full accessibility would require fundamental reconstruction

Restoration Costs and Impracticality

- Estimated restoration cost: \$29 million, excluding permitting, staffing, and future maintenance
- Requires disassembly, hazardous materials abatement, deep foundations, and complex reassembly
- All core mechanical and electrical systems have failed; last working pump ceased operation in May 2024

Operational and Maintenance Burdens

- Historically required near-daily maintenance, costing over \$100,000 annually
- Systemic failure of infrastructure now makes routine upkeep impossible



Fiscal Stewardship and Design Integrity

This entire project is budgeted at \$35 million and is only partially funded with \$15 million in public bond dollars, which must be used responsibly to maximize public benefit. The remainder of the project is to be funded with private support. At a cost of more than \$29 million, restoring an inoperable, structurally deficient, and environmentally hazardous fountain would consume the entire project budget, diverting resources from high-impact, community-supported improvements. If such improvements were mandated, it would fundamentally mean there would be no project at all.

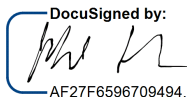
Instead, this investment should advance a reimagined public plaza like Bryant Park in NYC or Millenium Park in Chicago -- one that is safe, accessible, inclusive, resilient, and designed for San Francisco's future.

Request for Action

We respectfully request the Arts Commission's consideration and approval to proceed with the formal deaccession of the Vaillancourt Fountain from the Civic Art Collection and its removal from Embarcadero Plaza. This step is necessary to ensure public safety, uphold responsible stewardship of civic assets, and realize a reimagined Embarcadero Plaza that serves all San Franciscans.

RPD looks forward to working with the Arts Commission staff to bring this matter before the Visual Art Committee and full Commission this fall.

Sincerely,

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Philip A. Ginsburg

General Manager

San Francisco Recreation and Park Department

CC: Arts Commission

Recreation and Park Commission

Alicia John-Baptiste, Mayor's Office Chief of Infrastructure, Climate and Mobility

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