

## War Memorial Board of Trustees

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VIA EMAIL

November 13, 2025

Commission Streamlining Task Force  
San Francisco City Hall  
1 Dr. Carlton Goodlett Place, Room 408  
San Francisco, CA 94102

Re: War Memorial Board of Trustees – Response to Streamlining Task Force  
Recommendations

Dear Task Force Members:

We appreciate the thoughtful work of the Commission Streamlining Task Force and share your goal of improving efficiency and accountability across City departments. The War Memorial & Performing Arts Center (“War Memorial”) recognizes the need for sound governance while preserving the integrity of San Francisco’s world-class cultural institutions.

As one of the City’s three Charitable Trust departments—along with the Asian Art Museum and the Fine Arts Museums—the War Memorial carries a unique fiduciary responsibility. Our mission extends well beyond real-estate management: we operate a creative campus that sustains diverse artistic, educational, and multicultural offerings for local, national, and international audiences, supporting thousands of workers across the performing-arts sector and contributing significantly to San Francisco’s identity and economy.

While we agree with several of the Task Force’s recommendations—particularly maintaining the Board of Trustees and its Charter authority—we urge reconsideration of three specific recommendations that would fundamentally alter the governance and independence of the War Memorial.

### **1. Authority to Appoint the Managing Director**

We strongly believe the Board of Trustees should continue to appoint and, when necessary, remove the Managing Director. For more than 90 years, this structure has served the institution and the public well. The rationale offered for transferring this authority to the Mayor—that the War Memorial is primarily a real-estate department—misrepresents the scope of our work.

The War Memorial is one of the nation’s leading performing-arts centers, second only to Lincoln Center in scale. In addition to housing the San Francisco Ballet, Opera, and Symphony, we manage more than 400 events annually for hundreds of presenters from around the world. The Managing Director oversees a complex operation of booking and



production professionals, engineers, safety officers, and event staff who ensure artistic excellence and public access. To fulfill the aspirational goals of our Mission and Vision, the Managing Director also plays a leadership role, in partnership with the Board, in developing long-term strategy, which includes revenue generation objectives as well as ensuring we welcome performing artists who represent diverse viewpoints and performing arts forms.

Continuity of leadership, independent of political cycles, is essential to maintaining artistic freedom and protecting programming from political influence. Our peers—the Asian Art Museum and Fine Arts Museums—retain this independence for precisely this reason. The same principle applies to the War Memorial. Indeed, the ongoing political pressures faced by our counterpart, the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., demonstrate the risks of entangling cultural programming with shifting political priorities.

The Trustees, who understand the institution’s fiduciary, operational, and cultural responsibilities, are best positioned to make these leadership decisions.

## **2. Trustee Removal**

The City Charter currently allows removal of Trustees only for cause. The recommendation to change this to at-will would undermine the independence and stability that have defined this institution for nearly a century.

Under Charter Section 5.106, the Mayor must “give due consideration to those who have a special interest in the purposes for which the Center exists” when appointing Trustees. This provision makes clear that Trustees are to be selected for their knowledge of and commitment to the performing arts and San Francisco’s veterans—not as political appointees subject to shifting administrations. Their independence is integral to the War Memorial’s ability to fulfill its fiduciary duties and safeguard the City’s cultural legacy.

Changing the removal standard from “for cause” to “at-will” would contradict this Charter intent, introducing uncertainty and exposing the institution to political pressure. It could also discourage qualified community leaders and arts professionals from serving. The existing “for cause” provision under Charter Section 15.105 has long provided the right balance of accountability and protection, and it should remain in place.

## **3. Term Limits**

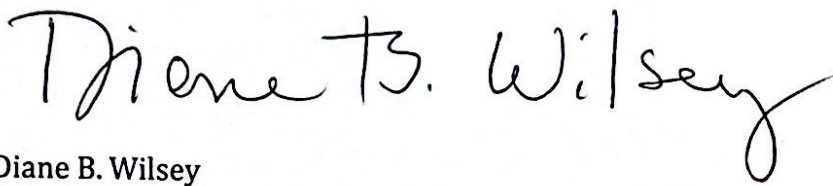
We agree that the Board should determine its own term limits but believe the recommended 12-year maximum is unnecessarily restrictive. The War Memorial’s work requires long-range vision and deep institutional knowledge, particularly in maintaining relationships with our resident companies, including the San Francisco Symphony, a named beneficiary of the original 1921 War Memorial Trust.

Trustees are selected for their expertise in music, dance, theater, and the business of operating a major performing arts center as well as veteran’s affairs. Arbitrary limits on

service would deprive the Board of continuity and accumulated experience essential to preserving the institution's legacy and fiscal health. The length of service should, therefore, remain at the discretion of the Board of Trustees, allowing it to balance renewal with the long-term stability that the War Memorial's mission and responsibilities demand.

We share the City's goal of transparent and effective governance and welcome continued collaboration. By maintaining the War Memorial's independent structure while modernizing where appropriate, we can uphold both the spirit and the purpose of Proposition E, approved by voters in November 2024.

Respectfully,  
The Board of Trustees  
San Francisco War Memorial & Performing Arts Center



Diane B. Wilsey  
President

cc: Mayor Daniel Lurie  
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