



# San Francisco Tomorrow

*Working to Protect the Urban Environment*

*Issue 314*

*Will you want to live in San Francisco – Tomorrow?*

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## *The future of undergrounding*

We've all seen photos of the aftermath of major earthquakes, with power poles askew and fallen electrical lines draped over cars and homes. In disaster movies, at least, snapped power lines dance like cobras lunging at hapless civilians. Safety does seem to be the primary concern of San Franciscans, when asked about reasons for burying overhead utility wires. In a survey of 3,013 residents, conducted by San Francisco's Utility Undergrounding Task Force (UUTF), 77% of respondents cited safety as a major concern. Another major interest was esthetics.

Formed in 2004, the UUTF issued its final report on January 26, 2007. The good news is that by 2008, 52.5% of the City's overhead wires will have been placed underground, about 520 miles of wire. The bad news is that 47.5%, or 470 miles of overhead wire, will remain. And the undergrounding program would cease for twelve years unless new funding mechanisms are developed.

Recently, Dan Weaver, Chair of the UUTF, and Dan McKenna, DPW Project Manager, outlined a proposal for a citywide program to underground all remaining overhead wires in San Francisco, within the next fifty years. This proposal is detailed in the "Utility Undergrounding Task Force Report to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors", available online at [www.sfgov.org/UUTF](http://www.sfgov.org/UUTF).

The Report calls for a transparent community process to develop an undergrounding master plan, with a citywide, strategic program. Possible funding options to be studied include user-based surcharges, utility user taxes, utility connection fees, property owner-based resources, Mello-Roos Districts, Community Benefit Districts, transfer tax fees, transfer tax rates and landscaping/light assessment districts.

The City of San Diego serves as one successful model. San Diego has developed an undergrounding program, authorized by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), implementing a 3.5% surcharge on residential electric bills. Their goal is full undergrounding in 20 years.

In San Francisco, undergrounding's actual costs have averaged \$3.97 million per mile, up from the estimated \$1 million per mile on which the current plan was based. Due to these cost escalations, San Francisco has borrowed against the approved CPUC funding program twelve years into the future. The UUTF Report recommends strategic planning to reduce current project timelines by 50% and project costs by 25%.

The UUTF blueprint for the future also addresses environmental justice issues. In some supervisorial districts, little undergrounding has been done work, while other Districts have benefited more. UUTF recommends that the areas with the most overhead wires receive the highest percentage of undergrounding dollars.

San Francisco Tomorrow extends kudos to the fifteen voting members of the UUTF, representing every supervisorial district, and the nine nonvoting members, representing City agencies and communications/ utility organizations. An electrifying job well done!

In the coming decade, San Francisco Tomorrow believes that we have an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform our streetscape and urban environment. There is a fortuitous confluence of billions of dollars in funding from PUC water/ sewer retrofits, public works projects, fiber-optics installations, utility upgrades, transportation systems, regional/neighborhood plans, large capital projects, ADA improvements and Better Streets Plans----as well as the utility undergrounding master plan. We need an integrated and coordinated approach to create the City of our dreams! Let us seize the moment!

# The Freeway Revolt

## What highways were planned

This map was printed in the November 2, 1956 issue of the San Francisco Chronicle (*overlaid onto Google Earth*) This is what the state highwaymen, and our local highwaymen, were planning. These plans generated a storm of opposition that culminated in the world famous freeway revolt of 1959. In the 1960s the highwaymen tried to push through the Panhandle and Golden Gate Freeways on slightly different routes from the ones shown on this map. Once again, they were stopped by citizen activists. In the 1970s they tried again to push the Golden Gate Freeway under the guise of making Doyle Drive safer. Today they are again trying to build a new Doyle Drive using safety and scenic beautification as excuses to widen it and bring more autos into San Francisco.



They continue to fail to realize that all the additional cars that these highway “improvements” will generate will all have to come down to the city streets and create more traffic jams. The city streets simply can not stand more automobiles. Additional people coming into the city must be brought in by improved and enhanced public transportation.

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## FUNDING OUR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Renewal of San Francisco Public Libraries set-aside is up for a vote on the November ballot. If Proposition D passes, the “full-service” measure will continue to provide funds for more books, open hours and librarians. It will also permit SFPL to float revenue bonds to finish its branch renovation program, now stymied by a \$50 million shortfall.

Since 1994, the so-called Library Preservation Fund (LPF) has set aside two-and-one-half cents of every \$100 dollars (of assessed property value) to pay for library services. In its first 13 years, the LPF launched a 53% increase in the number of hours libraries are open and quadrupled the budget for books and audio/visual materials. The new ballot measure expands the scope of the set-aside to permit its use -- under strict controls -- for bond payments.

Specifically, only *new* property tax could be used for bond service, estimated at about \$4 million a year over the next decade. And both the mayor and Board of Supervisors have to approve the bond sales. Moreover, library services cannot fall below those of fiscal 2006-2007, a year that saw sizable increases in both the book budget and computer technology. Jay Manglicmot, SFPL’s chief financial officer, anticipates about 3.5% annual growth in funding for library services, over and above that required for bond service.

SFPL surveys show that some 80-90% of patrons queried put books at the top of their wish list for library services. And the book budget increases annually. However, because more and more information is digitized, SFPL’s free access to computers has been a boon to research, both at home and in the library. Further, libraries in underserved neighborhood provide children and many adults with convenient, cost-free access to the latest technology in a comfortable setting.

It is not a stretch to say that passage of the original set-aside saved San Francisco's libraries from descending into second-class citizenship. Before it passed, the Jordan administration was cutting library services to balance the budget and firing library commissioners who disagreed with him. Libraries in underserved neighborhoods were designated as "reading centers" and opened only four days a week without a registered librarian on duty.

### ***More Service & Open Hours***

The set-aside enabled SFPL to provide full service at those branches and there are plans to extend hours at most of them this year. In addition, the branch modernization plan promises new libraries in the Portola area, Visitation Valley, Ingleside and Glen Park. And possibly Bayview and North Beach.

A new waterfront library opened at Mission Bay earlier this year. Other refurbished libraries include Excelsior, Marina, Sunset and West Portal. Four more are under construction But five libraries were defunded to transfer their budgets to 10 libraries farther along the pipeline. SFPL says set-aside renewal will make it possible to finish all remaining projects by 2011

While generally no fan of set-asides, San Francisco Tomorrow voted strongly to support renewal of SFPL's. However, board members were concerned about the General Obligation Bond Oversight Committee's failure to admonish SFPL in sufficient time to forestall erosion of its original \$106 million branch modernization bonds, passed by the voters in 1999. We intend to lobby GOBOC to be more vigilant in the future. The current shortfall, fueled by a slow start in contract-letting and a huge spike in construction costs would be offset by passage of Proposition D.

On balance, the SFT board strongly supports the measure because vibrant, up-to-date libraries are one measure of a great city. **Yes on D!**

### ***Natural Areas Program needs its rightful share of the budget***

The nearest endangered public lands are not off in the national forests or BLM lands, as you might think. If you live in San Francisco, they are probably within a ten minute walk from your house -- in the City's parks.

San Francisco is blessed with some of the most diverse remnant native habitats of any city in the country. Most are contained within 31 officially-

designated Significant Natural Resource Areas owned and managed by the City's Recreation and Parks Department (RPD), though some are located within the Presidio and on Public Utility Commission lands. These remnants contain the last vestiges of San Francisco's unique original plant and animal communities.

Amazingly, though, the Recreation and Parks Department is directly jeopardizing this priceless heritage by dramatically underfunding the division it created to protect those habitats -- the Natural Areas Program. Although the Natural Areas Program is responsible for 27% of the City's 4000 acres of park lands, it receives less than 1% of the RPD's \$150 million budget and has only 2% of the RPD's 299 gardeners.

A recent Legislative Analyst report commissioned by Supervisor Sean Elsbernd quantifies how the RPD has short-changed and undervalued its own division. This report compared the Natural Areas Program with similar initiatives in other urban areas and found that while the Natural Areas Program's Management Plan is a model the rest of the country is following, the Natural Areas Program receives dramatically less support than other programs.

Despite its cripplingly small budget and staff, the Natural Areas Program has been remarkably efficient and effective. It is also hugely popular, and drew 14,000 volunteer hours last year -- 1/3 of all volunteer hours contributed to all of RPD's programs. In those select areas where Natural Areas Program staff and volunteers work, the ever-present noxious invasive weeds are largely suppressed and the remnant indigenous species are augmented as needed through judicious plantings. However, the remainder of the Natural Areas Program's realms stand under immediate threat for lack of adequate personnel and resources.

Mt. Davidson is a great case in point. The 10 acres of grasslands and coastal scrub contain about 120 species of native plants -- some locally rare and threatened -- but they are jeopardized by about 25 species of noxious weeds. The 30 acres of "forests" consist of non-native eucalyptus and cypress trees under which a few aggressive weeds (ivy, cape ivy, and blackberry) nearly smother the 35 or so native species that manage to hang on. Mt. Davidson attracts over 200 species of migratory and residential birds, though suitable habitat is threatened by these noxious weeds. Concerted work by staff and volunteers over the past seven years has stemmed the tide in about five primary work areas as well as enhanced hiking trails, but the vast majority of Mt. Davidson's needs remain unaddressed for lack of personnel.

This astoundingly disproportionate allocation of resources is the work of RPD's upper management -- General Manager Yomi Agunbiade and the Recreation and Parks Commission -- and ultimately Mayor Newsom, at whose pleasure they all serve. It's hard to understand why these officials would jeopardize our public lands this way, particularly since protecting and preserving Significant Natural Resource Areas is hard-wired into the Open Space Element of the City's General Plan. Just as historic buildings are cherished and preserved, the City's remnant habitats are officially supposed to be protected.

Undercutting the Natural Areas Program is just part of the picture. The RPD expropriated nearly \$20 million from the Open Space Fund to pay for the money-losing Harding Park golf course, along with another multi-million dollar raid from the Open Space Fund for a swimming pool. A Budget Analyst report in 2006 established that the City must repay these funds with interest and penalties -- though to date the RPD has used a variety of tricks to avoid

restoring these badly needed funds to the programs for which they were intended.

With adequate staff and funding, the Natural Areas Program could succeed in its mission to protect and preserve San Francisco's endangered habitats while providing unparalleled volunteer and educational opportunities for the City's citizens. All that needs doing is to correct the dramatic misappropriation of resources by the responsible officials.

Review the Legislative Analyst's Report at [http://www.ci.sf.ca.us/site/uploadedfiles/bdsupvrs/leganalyst/OLA\\_096-06\\_Natural\\_Area\\_Mgmt\\_Plans\\_final.pdf](http://www.ci.sf.ca.us/site/uploadedfiles/bdsupvrs/leganalyst/OLA_096-06_Natural_Area_Mgmt_Plans_final.pdf) and then contact RPD General Manager Yomi Agunbiade ([yomi.agunbiade@sfgov.org](mailto:yomi.agunbiade@sfgov.org)), the Recreation and Parks Commission ([margaret.mcarthur@sfgov.org](mailto:margaret.mcarthur@sfgov.org)), Mayor Newsom ([gavin.newsom@sfgov.org](mailto:gavin.newsom@sfgov.org)), and your district Supervisor. Tell them that the Natural Areas Program is a model of efficiency and effectiveness and that you object to shortchanging their budget.

## JOIN THE FIGHT AS AN SFT MEMBER!

You can help protect our urban environment as an up-to-date member of San Francisco Tomorrow. Celebrate SFT's 35<sup>th</sup> **Year of Action** by sending in your dues check as a 2007 member. Your choice: \$15, \$25, \$35, \$50 or more. Make checks payable to "San Francisco Tomorrow" and mail them to SFT at 41 Sutter Street, #1579, San Francisco 94104-4903.



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