

Our View

Presidio's success offers a lesson for San Francisco

If you want to know how far the Presidio has come in the last 20 years, it helps to remember where it started from.

When the U.S. Army decamped in 1994, the Presidio had been a military base for more than 200 years — and it showed. Many of its historic buildings were neglected, in poor repair and seemingly destined for demolition. It was such a dump that a then-new Republican congressman proposed it simply be sold off piecemeal to developers.

While San Franciscans rightly recoiled at that suggestion, the threat of selling the Presidio off remained popular enough in Washington, D.C., that it was enshrined in the 1996 legislation that designated the Presidio as the nation's only National Park to be run as a public-private partnership. The Presidio Trust was given responsibility for managing the park and given until fiscal 2013 to make the park financially self-sufficient. If it did not, the sale idea would be resurrected.

So it's hugely significant that, as we first reported on Feb. 1, this long-looming threat has now been retired. The trust passed the break-even mark in operational terms a few years ago, and in recent months did so on the capital side as well. Under the terms of the Congressional mandate, that makes it permanent.

It's also useful to remember how it was able to get to this point: By staying outside the tender mercies of San Francisco's city government in general, and away from the political machinations of San Francisco supervisors in particular. With the trust's federal mandate to generate revenue, renovation and redevelopment on an industrial scale were a matter of when and how, not if. Being outside the city's purview and politics allowed them to get on with it.

Granted, San Francisco officials faced a steep curve learning how to deal with an area of the city expressly outside their control. No sooner had the park been designated than city officials decreed its old housing would be used to house the homeless, an idea quickly nixed by the U.S. Park Service. Former Mayor Willie Brown's high-level lobbying to install himself onto the Presidio Trust board was also rebuffed. The park's early years were marked by some of San Francisco's smaller-minded politicians periodically threatening to turn off its utilities or shut down its entrances if it didn't toe the city's line. Reason prevailed, and the threats gradually went away.

In the meantime, the Presidio Trust was able to move rapidly. The Letterman complex moved from crumbling relic to a shining new headquarters for Lucasfilm, start to finish, in about six years, a timeline that would be unimaginable for a 900,000-square-foot project elsewhere in the city. The former U.S. Public Health Service Hospital was returned to life as high-end apartments after 30 years' closure, though opposition in adjoining neighborhoods prompted the Trust to cut its plans for 350 units by more than half. More than 1,000 housing units were renovated, dozens of historic buildings rehabbed, new construction sprinkled in. The Presidio didn't get it right with every decision or action — but the key thing is that it was able to decide and act. Maybe that's a lesson for San Francisco officials on how to run the rest of the city.

Too often in San Francisco, bureaucratic process is regarded not as a prelude to action, but as an alternative to it. That failing is exaggerated by the outsized deference given to small, loud but not necessarily representative groups which have learned which buttons to push to bring everything to a crawl.

The Presidio's still a work in progress. But it's a useful example for San Francisco of how to get things done. ■