



SAN FRANCISCO ARTS COMMISSION

EDWIN M. LEE
MAYOR

February 24, 2012

TOM DECAIGNY
DIRECTOR OF
CULTURAL AFFAIRS

Mr. John Arntz
Director of Elections
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place, Room 48
San Francisco, CA 94103

PROGRAMS

RE: Request for Analysis of Ballot Initiative Entitled "Coit Tower Policy"

CIVIC ART COLLECTION
CIVIC DESIGN REVIEW
COMMUNITY ARTS
& EDUCATION
CULTURAL EQUITY GRANTS
PUBLIC ART
STREET ARTISTS LICENSES

ARTS COMMISSION GALLERY
401 VAN NESS AVENUE
415.554.6080

Dear Mr. Arntz,

WWW.SFARTSCOMMISSION.ORG
ARTSCOMMISSION@SFGOV.ORG

I am writing in response to your letter dated February 17, 2012 regarding the proposed initiative measure titled "Coit Tower Policy" that may qualify for the June 5, 2012 election ballot. Per your request, the San Francisco Arts Commission has prepared the following analysis. As detailed below, our office believes that the proposed measure, as written and if adopted, would be overly restrictive of the commercial activities and private events at Coit Tower, which provide critical revenue streams for the Recreation & Parks Department and the Civic Art Collection of which the Coit Tower murals are a part.

Background

The San Francisco Arts Commission was established by voters under the 1932 San Francisco Charter. The Charter gave the Arts Commission jurisdiction over all of the art belonging to the City which was not included in the collection of the Asian Art or Fine Arts Museums and charged the Arts Commission with the preservation and care of artwork in the Civic Art Collection. The murals located at Coit Tower are a part of the Civic Art Collection, which today is comprised of over 4,000 objects, 800 of which are integrated into public facilities and spaces of every description, from the airport to the zoo. Collectively the Civic Art Collection is valued in excess of \$90 million dollars. Sadly, this one-of-a-kind collection has been historically underfunded. For FY 10/11 city funding for the maintenance/conservation budget for the entire collection was \$75,000. We believe that the conservation of the Coit Tower murals would far exceed this annual allocation.

Created in 1934, the murals at Coit Tower include 27 distinct frescos painted by 25 artists, many of whom either studied with or were influenced by the famous Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. Under the pilot Public Works of Art Project, Coit Tower would become a model for the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A), which put thousands of artists to work during the Great Depression. The murals capture California life and reflect some of the socio-political issues that were important at the time. Since their creation, the murals have become a beloved cultural legacy, a source of enjoyment and pride for residents and one of the City's top tourist destinations.



CITY AND COUNTY OF
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In 1990, the Arts Commission was funded to undertake the conservation of the ground floor murals. It should be noted that the condition of these murals remain significantly better than before the 1990 restoration, which is a testament to the protective measures that have been in place for some time and that include a metal barrier located in front of the murals, glass coverings on some of the most vulnerable areas and restricted access to the murals located on the second floor.

However, 22 years later, there is still significant restoration work to be done. The Arts Commission has continuously and systematically documented the condition of the murals over the years. Most of the observed damage is either mechanical, direct contact with the murals by an object or person that causes the displacement of pigment, and environmental. The environmental damage is largely the result of moisture absorbed through the porous cast-concrete structure making its way through the face of the murals leaving salt deposits or “efflorescence” in its wake. This is a well-documented historic, problem that requires ongoing attention. However, without a dedicated and sufficient revenue source, the Arts Commission has been unable to neither mitigate damage to the murals nor engage in restoration efforts.

Currently, the Arts Commission is awaiting a comprehensive condition assessment from a leading conservator specializing in W.P.A.-era mural art that will prescribe a course of action and associated costs. Without this report, it is unknown what the total cost of the restoration will be. Recently, the Recreation and Parks Department pledged \$250,000 towards the restoration of the murals as well as 1% of the revenues generated by the Coit Tower concessionaire, which will be dedicated to ongoing maintenance and care of the murals. Early projections indicate that under this agreement the Arts Commission would receive approximately \$6,000 per annum for ongoing maintenance and restoration of the Coit Tower murals. This amount is significant for our office, which otherwise does not have a dedicated source of guaranteed funds for this gem of the Civic Art Collection. Without this ongoing support, our staff would have to aggressively fundraise in order to provide the care that these murals need. With only two staff members committed to overseeing and addressing the needs of all 4,000 objects in the Civic Art Collection, it would not nor has it been feasible for our office to raise the adequate funds to provide a top level of care for the collection.

According to the Recreation & Parks Department’s *Request For Proposal for the Lease and Operation of Coit Tower*, the terms and conditions to which the Coit Tower concessionaire must adhere are already very strict with regard to mural protection. It requires that the concessionaire work closely with the Arts Commission to ensure that the murals are not endangered by onsite activity and a protection plan must be submitted as part of any proposal.

Economic Impact of the Measure on the Coit Tower Murals

While our office shares the same goals and concerns as those putting forth this measure, we feel that, as it is currently written, it is too vague with regard to the proposed limitations on commercial activities and events and that it is overly restrictive of the tower's revenue generating activities. Under our new agreement with the Recreation & Parks Department, the commercial activities at the tower will become an important funding stream that will enable the Arts Commission to maintain a level of care for the murals, which up until recently has not existed. Furthermore, given that the annual maintenance allowance will be impacted by concessionaire sales, so long as the strict restrictions with regard to mural protection are followed, we feel that it is in the best interest of the murals for the Recreation & Parks Department to encourage a flexible business model to ensure maximum profitability.

Coit Tower draws thousands of visitors a year, whether through private events or simply to look at the murals or the spectacular views from the roof. The only sure solution to guaranteeing the murals' protection from mechanical damage would be to eliminate access all together—this is not an option. The fact that there can be revenue generating activity does not necessarily mean that there will be a negative impact on the murals.

In summation, the San Francisco Arts Commission is committed to the long-term care of the Coit Tower murals, which are undoubtedly one of the City's most treasured and valuable artistic assets. We are doing everything we can, despite very limited resources, to ensure that the murals will be enjoyed for many generations to come. The Arts Commission and the Recreation & Parks Department are strongly aligned in our commitment to the health of Coit Tower and its murals. Together, we will usher in a new era where care and revenue generation are mutually beneficial. We invite the greater community to join our effort and help us support this iconic landmark.

A representative from the San Francisco Arts Commission will attend the Ballot Simplification Committee on Monday, February 27, 2012 to answer any questions the Committee may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom DeCaigny". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tom DeCaigny
Director of Cultural Affairs