DEDICATION

Dedicated in loving memory to Grace Lee Boggs whose words, actions and life embodied the spirit of resistance and transformation this project seeks to inspire.

“The time has come for us to reimagine everything. We have to reimagine work and go away from labor. We have to reimagine revolution and get beyond protest. We have to think not only about change in our institutions, but changes in ourselves. We are at the stage where the people in charge of the government and industry are running around like chickens with their heads cut off. It’s up to us to reimagine the alternatives and not just protest against them and expect them to do better.”

—Grace Lee Boggs

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Time Runs Short to Stop
San Francisco Public Land Giveaway

Community college and low-income residents face big loss of public resource

By Marcy Rein and Christine Hanson

On weekdays the windswept lot next to the main campus of City College of San Francisco (CCSF) can hold close to 1,000 cars belonging to students and teachers. On weekends a motorcycle safety class practices there, as does the marching band from Archbishop Riordan High School. This lot, the Balboa Reservoir, is one of the largest tracts of public land in land-starved San Francisco—and a key arena in the city’s fight to stem displacement of its vulnerable communities and the institutions that serve them.

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) dug the reservoir in 1957, but never used it to store water. The utility owns 60 percent of the property. The rest of the parcel belongs to CCSF, the 80-year-old community college that many call “San Francisco’s most important working-class institution.”

In 2014, the reservoir became the first site to be studied under San Francisco’s Public Land for Housing program, which is supposed to ensure 30,000 units of new housing by 2020, one-third of them affordable.

After two years of community outreach tightly managed by the city, the Balboa Reservoir Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) issued their “Principles and Parameters” for
the project. These development guidelines cede the 17.5 acres of public land to private interests, and do little to protect City College against encroachment, including loss of its parking lot. They address existing traffic congestion with proposals to encourage alternatives to driving, and to build shared off-street parking to absorb the impact of as many as 500 new housing units.

“The Reservoir has implications for the whole city; there is an opportunity to set precedent for the [use of] public land and impact the housing crisis,” says Jessie Fernandez, an organizer for PODER (People Organized to Demand Environmental and Economic Justice). “The attack on public resources like City College is consistent with the attack on housing,” he says.

Planning Slams the Door on Alternatives

Mayor Ed Lee and Supervisor Norman Yee, who represents District 7 where the project is located, appointed the nine members of the CAC. City staff from the mayor’s Office of Economic and Workforce Development (OEWD) and the Planning Department worked directly with the committee.

From the first CAC meeting, members of the community commented that the project seemed to be a “done deal.” Indeed, the city always seemed to be driving the committee towards a destination, with the voices of the community trailing along behind like cans tied to a bumper.

“The Mayor brought his people out there to school us, show us what is what, and make a show of listening,” says Monica Collins, a resident of the nearby Sunnyside neighborhood and recently retired CCSF employee.

The city proudly announced that the guidelines call for 50 percent affordable housing, but in fact only one-third meets the definition of affordability under state law, and only 18 percent is earmarked for low-income families. Two-thirds will be unaffordable or market rate—in a city that is falling far short of its affordable housing goals.

“They need to construct decent housing for low-income people,” says PODER member Maria Elena Ramos. “All the families I know pay high rents, and we have no space for our children,” she says.

The city maintains that the market-rate housing is necessary to subsidize the affordable units. “Without these subsidies, the Balboa Reservoir affordable housing would take funds away from other affordable housing projects in the city,” OEWD’s Emily Lesk explained to the December 2016 CAC meeting.

Affordable housing experts say that other building and financing options are possible. Cutting the cost of land, for one thing, would go a long way towards reducing the costs of development and making more affordable housing feasible. “There is no reason to pay market rate for the land. There are provisions in the City Administrative Code that would permit sale below market rate for enterprise departments, including the PUC,” says Joseph Smooke, an affordable housing developer and activist who serves as the Richmond District Director for the Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco.

“The mayor’s office is caught in an ideological world-view in which the only solution is market-driven,” says Council of Community Housing Organizations (CCHO) Co-Director Fernando Martí. The Council brought a paper to the CAC that laid out several scenarios for increasing the project’s affordable housing, but the group wasn’t granted space on the agenda. Instead, it was restricted to two minutes in public comment.
“The Reservoir Project has been able to steam ahead because the City has successfully framed it as an affordable housing effort,” says Alvin Ja, a Sunnyside resident who has followed the issue closely. “It needs to be framed, instead, as a transfer of public assets to private interests.”

**Transportation = Education Access**

Development at the reservoir site will eliminate the lot that furnishes one-third of the total parking spaces at City College’s Ocean Campus. Failure to replace these spaces could cripple the school, already battered by an accreditation crisis that began in 2012. Enrollment has plummeted by an average of 6,000 students per year—from more than 90,000 to around 66,000—since the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) issued its sanctions. (See RP&E Vol. 21-1, “‘School Reform’ and Land Grabs Threaten SF’s City College.”) City College is a commuter school; Ocean is the largest campus and the only one of CCSF’s ten locations with direct freeway access. Loss of parking would create another obstacle for students already struggling with class cuts, restrictions on repeating courses, and other rules student activists call “push-out” policies.

“Our students’ lives are fragile, packed. You have single parents, part-time workers, people who have to take a car if they want to go to City College. They don’t have time to take one MUNI bus after another,” says Collins, who worked in CCSF’s financial aid office for 15 years. In a survey of CCSF students, faculty, staff and administrators, 90 percent cited “arriving on time” and 73 percent named “travel time” as “very important” or “extremely” important considerations when choosing transportation to school.

Parking will also be essential for CCSF’s long-planned Performing Arts Education Center (PAEC). The PAEC, with its 650-seat theater and audio/video recording facilities, would complete the college, allowing it to expand its job training, and raise revenue by hosting performance festivals and events.

The CAC didn’t discuss the reservoir project’s effects on City College until six months into its process, and the first draft of the Principles and Parameters failed to even mention

![City College was built on public land that had been the Sheriff’s Ingleside Jail from 1876-1934. Courtesy of Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.](image-url)
the possibility of the PAEC. CCSF supporters gamely endured presentations on such issues as “design variation in building architecture” and “landscape, lighting and greenery” before being able to voice the school’s needs. After multiple meetings, they got language into the Principles and Parameters that acknowledges the PAEC and promises to “ensure that development at the Balboa Reservoir site does not negatively impact City College’s educational mission and operational needs.”

The Principles and Parameters are merely guidelines, however; they have no legal standing. And they neither call out the impact that loss of parking will have on the school, nor name mitigation of the loss as a solution. “The Reservoir is a tipping point,” longtime CCSF Music Dept. Chair Madeline Mueller says. “If they take the parking and don’t replace it, we’re on our way to being a really small college.”

City College will need to aggressively enforce its interests—and administrators installed since the 2013 state takeover have so far participated in the downsizing of the school, the sell-off of land, and private meetings with city agencies.

Emergency Managers Sell Off Land and Partner with the City

After the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges ruled in July 2013 that City College should close, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors put the school under emergency management. Robert Agrella became the Special Trustee With Extraordinary Powers (STWEP) and the elected Board of Trustees was sidelined.

In September 2013 Agrella scuttled the PAEC, sending $38 million in matching funds for the project back to the state. Next he began marketing the college’s administration building at 33 Gough Street. Then the Civic Center Campus was closed on a half-day’s notice at the beginning of the 2015 winter term, displacing 1,700 students, most of them new immigrants learning English as a second language.

After the elected trustees regained power early in 2016, the development agenda rolled on, with several City College administrators, all hired by Agrella when he was STWEP, consulting regularly with the city planning department, the mayor’s office, and the SF-
PUC on the Balboa Reservoir project as well as City College facilities planning.

At the CAC meeting in January 2016, CCSF music instructor Harry Bernstein inquired about these unpublicized meetings among city staff and college administrators. “It is appropriate for public sector colleagues to meet,” OEWD’s Emily Lesk said in her prepared response at the next meeting. But the process has lacked transparency: The proceedings of these collegial meetings weren’t even shared with campus committees charged with facilities planning.

Ultimately City College signed a deal with a private developer to build housing at 33 Gough St., only one-third of it affordable. It is still pondering development plans for the Civic Center site. A revived PAEC appears in the draft of the college’s new Facilities Master Plan, alongside a 60-foot-wide access road leading not into the campus, but into the planned reservoir development. This comes after the CCSF trustees stated in their July 2016 resolution, “CCSF cannot grant the city a roadway between the Multi-Use Building and the planned PAEC.” The elected board, however, is not invited to the meetings between city staff and college administrators.

Moving Forward

The city took its first public step toward finding a developer for Balboa Reservoir in November 2016. The developer’s proposal must pass an environmental impact review under CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act), and secure approvals from the SFPUC, the Planning Dept., the Planning Commission, and the Board of Supervisors. Each of these approvals can be an opportunity for community mobilization.

Site of the proposed Balboa Reservoir project, now a CCSF parking lot. © Madeline Mueller
The CEQA study in particular offers City College a valuable tool, though the administration will need to be pushed to use it, according to Alvin Ja. The Trustees and administration could insist that the reservoir project be required to pay for replacement of all the parking it takes away. “This would be in line with CEQA requirements for mitigation of adverse impacts on public/educational services,” Ja says. It would also help the adjacent neighborhoods, whose streets take up the slack when parking demand exceeds capacity.

But the CEQA review won’t come up until 2019, according to the San Francisco Planning Department. Well after community members and City College students, staff and faculty will have been worn down by four years of frustrating advisory meetings, and the even longer fight to defend and rebuild the college.

“It’s late in the process for leverage,” says Joseph Smooke. “If people want to change the direction of the process, they will have to build serious power,” he says, and confront a Board of Supervisors that tilted towards developers in the 2016 election.

The stakes are as high as the challenges are daunting. “Sites like the Balboa Reservoir represent an indispensable public resource that should be prioritized as a public good for this and future generations,” says CCHO’s Martí. Providing 100 percent affordable housing while protecting the parking needed by CCSF students and faculty is eminently possible, according to Martí. Indeed, the Ocean Avenue side of the reservoir is already home to an attractive apartment building featuring 100 percent affordable housing, built on public land acquired for less than market rate. “It is totally a question of political will,” Martí says.

Christine Hanson is an Equine Bodyworker, continuing CCSF student and Save CCSF Coalition member who lives in the Excelsior District. Marcy Rein is a longtime contributor to Race, Poverty & the Environment.

Endnotes
1. The city gets to 50 percent affordability by offering 18 percent of the housing for low-income families earning up to 55 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI), or $56,050 per year for a family of four; another 15 percent for families earning 120 percent of AMI, $129,250 for a family of four; and another 17 percent for a range of income levels up to 150 percent AMI, $161,550 for a family of four.
5. From 2012-2016, 774 classes were canceled, and the City College administration announced plans to cut another 26 percent by 2020. Students are also facing bureaucratic rules that make it more difficult to enroll, cuts in federal Pell Grants for tuition, and loss of state fee waivers if they try to return after failing to complete more than half their classes one semester.
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