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City of Belvedere

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Belvedere, California 94920

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City Council
Belvedere, California 94920

April 5, 2019

RE: Belvedere Avenue Viewsite "Artist's View"

Dear Mayor McCaskill and Belvedere City Council Members,

I have been a Belvedere resident since 1987 when I moved here with my family. I am writing to express my concern regarding the recent developments at the "Artist's View Lot" on Belvedere Avenue.

Making this viewsite an accessible 'open space' for the general public will lead to very negative changes to the safety, natural habitat, and tranquility that defines Belvedere's distinctive character.

Several of the nearest neighbors watched in surprise as normal view-maintenance became a clandestine land-clearing operation, cutting down mature live oaks, trees and bushes. All this was done without first notifying neighbors of the intent to dramatically disrupt the landscape and natural habitat. This very lush vegetation and park-like nature are an essential part of the character of Belvedere.

Soon after, a survey crew appeared at the site, and the rumors quickly became about a large public park with play structures, swing sets, party decks, picnic tables, dog run, and gathering places to replace the endlessly problematic unofficial teen hangout at the Ganz property.

At the March 14th Parks and Open Space committee meeting, one of the members even remarked that "...I'm actually hoping that those teenagers *DO* go there because they need a place..." A public park will inevitably attract and permanently endorse the public nuisances and the indecency that have made the infamous hangout at the Ganz property so notorious, only further emboldening more than our fair share of lover's lane couples, trespassers and thieves who already target our neighborhood.

The combination of hyper-publicity on websites like Google Maps and the extreme fire danger are particularly worrying, especially considering the recent legalization and widespread use of recreational marijuana. Just imagine the devastating and costly consequences to our City resulting from a single butt thrown carelessly onto the dry grassy hillside or a bonfire. Any fires or cigarette left unattended at the beach could easily spark to dry grass on steep surrounding hillsides and rage out of control, quickly reaching conflagration-level before anyone at house or street level would notice - a life-threatening hazard to people and property.

A public park also creates many concerns about ongoing maintenance issues regarding the cleaning, policing, servicing, bathrooms for picnickers, and collection of bottles, trash, and dog waste from the property. Already, the recently cleared "Winifred Bridge Allen" viewsite bench

attracts visitors who frequently throw piles of litter down the hill for residents to pick up or even climb down the steep terraces there to the beach at tremendous personal risk and liability to property owners and the City.

The small beach below Artist's View is a gravel area surrounded by concrete sewer line, and jagged rocks covered in seaweed/kelp. These very slick rocks could be a serious slipping hazard for visitors, and it's not hard to imagine someone slipping and striking their head (or worse) on the rocks and not being able to call for help or drowning in the surf. There is also a very serious liability for the City and for surrounding residents, as well as liability concern about general public access around the pier which has very low head clearance and whose foundations are very slippery for anybody walking there, a serious liability that would be created by this City action.

There are already many parks with great views around Belvedere, from the Shoreline Park and Elephant rock, to the China Cabin where anyone can enjoy views of the Bay or enjoy a picnic. Angel Island itself is a 768-acre park in the middle of the Bay with miles of trails and dozens of picnic sites that is only a 10-minute ferry ride away. The Harry B. Allen Lane/stairway leads to a fantastic 600-foot natural walking beach which is far superior to anything else in Belvedere.

The view from the Winifred B. Allen bench viewsite already provides the most dramatic and panoramic views of Angel Island, San Francisco, and the Golden Gate Bridge that are possible from this area of Belvedere. At the Artist's View, only partial views of San Francisco and Angel Island are visible and the view at street level is the best. The Golden Gate Avenue Circular Park also has great views, as does the shoreline walk along Beach Road adjacent to the China Cabin.

A new park at Artist's View would also create significant traffic and parking impact to a neighborhood that already lacks enough street-parking for residents, guests and visitors, and construction workers. Traffic on our effectively one-lane roads is already congested enough both during the week and weekends, often requiring multiple reversings to accomplish one trip to or from town. When bicyclists are on the road, it is virtually impossible to pass safely within the 15 mile-per-hour speed limit because of pedestrians, parked cars, and other traffic – the proposed park will increase all manner of traffic and dramatically increase risk of injury or death on our roads.

Our parking problems will only be exacerbated by the proposed park at Artist's View. Within a 400-foot radius of Artist's View there are approximately 28 parking spaces on Belvedere Avenue, Beach Road and Blanding Lane. However, the spaces on Blanding lane are unmarked and residents know to park only on the west side of the street to allow larger vehicles like trucks and first responders to pass (just barely). Non-residents don't know about this convention and often make the street impassible. One can easily imagine tourists looking for parking nearby, losing patience, and just parking anywhere they can, leaving inconvenience and potential disaster in their wake. First responders already have a trouble reaching people in Southern Belvedere in time due to the naturally winding streets and parked cars, and these kinds of thoughtless moments could cost the lives or homes of the more elderly residents or anyone for whom a delay of just minutes means life or death.

Over the years, I've observed significant changes in the number and variety of species around the island as more homes are built, directly impacting the habitat available to wildlife. I've watched the mass Monarch butterfly migration slow to just a trickle as large Eucalyptus trees that once

provided refuge to these magnificent creatures were steadily cut down (including several on the viewsite). It's understandable and rational that individual residents prioritize views over natural environment. However, that same lack of sensitivity and balanced respect for nature should not be City policy.

I've often watched as boaters on the bay deliberately change course to go directly into the middle of flocks of thousands of migrating or feeding sea birds, causing them all to take flight. I've watched owls and hawks and eagles immediately take flight because a person or dog has come into their view, as they literally have 'eagle's eyes' and their need to keep a safe distance from unknown threats. I've seen how people change the entire character of a space when they intrude upon it, doing nothing to stop their children or dogs from giving chase to the wildlife. Allowing the general public a new park to further disturb wildlife in the area would be devastating for local ecology.

Wild animals will be even further displaced by humans and the presence of pet dogs if the project goes forward. A map showing the 'open space' or undeveloped City parcels (outlined in red) that might be considered 'wildlife refuges' as most of Belvedere is now fenced off, leaving animals with few places to hide or rest from human disturbance. The viewsite 'park' adjacent to our properties provides the only such refuge and protection for wildlife in the entire southern half of Belvedere, and general access to the shoreline would irreparably impact this ecosystem.

In the last fifty years, there are many wild species that have become habituated to the general lack of human presence on and around the Artist's View viewsite and the shoreline area. The neighbors were always careful to ensure that this area was available for animals to hide and raise their young. We have observed and documented Bald Eagles, Owls, Great Blue Herons, Brown Pelicans, Osprey, Red-Tailed Hawk, White-tailed Kite, Ravens, Egrets, Turkeys and Turkey Vultures, Deer, Foxes, Rabbits, Raccoons, Coyotes, Newt/Salamanders, flocks of migrating Monarch butterflies, and River Otters. The River Otters were observed frequently swimming in the small cove, using the beach, climbing between the large rocks at the base of the Artist's View parcel, and venturing into the dense brush on the parcel where there are many fallen logs that are typical Otter habitat.

I find it appalling that the City has thus far shown itself to be insensitive in its duty to guardianship of the environment and neighbor's interests at Artist's View. I found it shocking that the City went far beyond the normal trimming at street level to almost completely raze to bare dirt a serene fifty-year-old 'wild lands' habitat. No effort was made to understand the sensitive ecology of the viewsite parcel before virtually clear-cutting it and forcing our local wildlife and the many potentially protected species to scramble to look for new homes.

During the recent Parks and Open Space committee meeting, a member mentioned the artist Christo during their discussions, saying that "part of the whole process is just the bureaucracy too, that's part of the art... that's what we're doing here." Christo's art is indeed famously difficult to get done, but he is also known for that fact that after the installation is over, the natural landscape is returned to the original state, as if no human presence had ever been there. Christo once said, "Do you know that I don't have any artworks that exist? They all go away when they're finished. Only the preparatory drawings, and collages are left, giving my works an almost legendary character. I think it takes much greater courage to create things to be gone than to create things that will remain."

The dedication plaque at Belvedere Avenue states, "an artist's eye and a generous heart gave this viewsite to Belvedere in perpetuity." I knew the partner of the quiet artist who originally donated the viewsite to Belvedere and I'd like to say I understood some of ways he lived his life with sensitivity.

The artist who donated Artist's View, Mason Wells, was extremely active in the community and worked with many others to preserve the Tiburon Tidelands in the 1950s. Without the efforts of these early conservationists, a Belvedere lagoon or Paradise Cay style landfill development would have stretched the entire distance from Belvedere to Strawberry Point. This was an era before the words conservation or ecology were widely used, but the sentiments were there as previously open spaces were rapidly slated for development.

Circumstances have changed dramatically since the property was given as a scenic viewsite to the City in 1976. When Mason Wells bought a house in Belvedere in 1948, the number of vacant lots or open spaces in the southern part of Belvedere was nearly 65. When Wells built the house at 4 Blanding Lane in 1967 with his partner Frank Hamilton (who he had known at least since 1948), there were 35 vacant lots. By 1976 it had already dropped to 20. Today it is just 8, including the four Ganz lots that are currently being cleared for development (the lava landscape and cliffs never really provided much habitat to any animals). Three other lots are in private hands and available for development. The only true open space and wildlife habitat left in the entire southern area of Belvedere is the parcel that the Parks and Open Space Committee has targeted for development: Artist's View.

Permanently paving-over a natural landscape is irreversible, and it would be a great tragedy to turn the mysterious natural beauty of Artist's View into a sterilized concrete environment with a constant flow of human traffic. I encourage the City and Council to respect the spirit of the gift and maintain the parcel as a scenic view-way and wildlife habitat.

Please work to preserve the rapidly diminishing habitats left to wildlife in our community by permanently designating the Artist's View lot as a sanctuary for all the animals that have no voice in our modern world.

Thank you for your kind consideration.

Sincerely,



Klaus Johannsmeier