

**QUESTIONING PLANS TO IMPLEMENT THE “LIVING CLASSROOM”
CONCEPT PROPOSED BY
LITERACY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**

Literacy for Environmental Justice has developed and is promoting a plan to construct a building as a “living classroom” that is to be used to educate youth about the environment. It has proposed John McLaren Park in the Portola District as the construction site. In its original conception, the facility was to be constructed in Heron’s Head Park in the Bayview/Hunter’s Point (BVHP) area of the city. The following is intended to stimulate questions as to whether the project satisfies the concept of “justice” be it social or environmental.

The threshold concern is the project’s apparent inconsistency with our sense of “social justice”. Funds for the project were intended to serve the residents of BVHP as remediation for decades of neglect and pollution. The neglect was the absence of any concerted initiative to encourage public, civic and commercial interests to provide residents in the area with the panoply of services that residents in more economically advantaged communities enjoy in proximity to their homes. It led to the unfettered use of the area as a private and public dumping ground. The degradation cast a pall on the BVHP as an area that is undesirable, unworthy and unsuitable for new enterprises. The pall took deep roots in the self worth of many residents’ and even more broadly, dampened hopes. Initiatives to reverse the trend have started and should be encouraged as new opportunities arise. As originally conceived the Living Classroom was part of this positive trend.

Civic leaders, private citizens, and philanthropic individuals and organizations are beginning to recognize, appreciate and rectify the social injustices perpetrated on BVHP. The goal is to reclaim the area and reestablish its social and economic worth, and a sense of its worth in the minds and hearts of area residents. One initiative toward that goal is the grant of funds to LEJ to construct the “living classroom” building. Nevertheless, LEJ has decided to move the project out of the BVHP the Portola district’s John McLaren Park. The proposed action unwittingly fuels the cycle of aversion and neglect that has undermined the the BVHP for decades and reinforces the belief that there are better places to do business more easily, more effectively and more economically. In the interest of social justice, the hurdles that LEJ wants to avoid by relocating to the Portola District are the very challenges that should compel the organization to stay in and help in the revitalization of BVHP.

LEJ has offers the following justification for the decision to relocate the project:

The “no alternative sites” argument: The BVHP area encompasses approximately 6 sq. miles. Much of the area is still contaminated with pollutants. Other area are controlled b y public agencies. Everyone understands that the project cannot be built on any of the contaminated sites. However, all of the BVHP is not contaminated. LEJ further argues that public agencies who control some possible sites have been uncooperative. The situation presents a challenge for the project, not an excuse to leave the area. It requires the organization to muster the extant political interest to overcome whatever environmental and bureaucratic obstacles that exist.

The “insufficient budget” argument: LEJ goes on to argue that the building that has been designed for the Heron’s Head location cannot be constructed with the available budget; i.e., the

project needs an additional \$150,000+ for construction of piers to stabilize the building. The stabilization issue was not factored into the budget. From a contractual point of view, an architect is responsible for designing a building that can be constructed with the budget allowed. From a design and engineering point of view, an essential first step is to ensure that the site and soils can support the construction. The error places a contractual and fiduciary responsibility on the architects to correct their mistake at their own expense.

The “larger service population” argument: LEJ states that more BVHP youth can be served from the out-of-district location. The assertion echoes the old rationale that has undermined efforts to develop the district: e.g., in order to provide service to the community, you don’t have to be in the community. LEJ uses statistics provided by supervisors from the affected schools to reinforce its position. The statistics show that the 15 schools within 1.5 miles of the proposed McLaren Park site enroll 2,676 students who otherwise reside in the BVHP. LEJ contrasts this number with the 1,054 students attending 4 schools in the BVHP who would be served if the “living classroom” were to be located at the site originally proposed, Heron’s Head Park. LEJ concludes: more BVHP students would be served through a Portola district location.

In fact, the statistics on which the LEJ relies confirms that the BVHP is grossly under served i.e., the unfortunate fact that there are 2,676 youth who have to leave the district to obtain the services they ought to be receiving locally. LEJ should not be reinforcing the already institutionalized problem by relocating its project, and should not be implicitly telling the affected youth that their neighborhood is not good enough. Cumulatively, the district has 3,730 school age youth who could be served by a “living classroom” located in the BVHP. In essence, LEJ’s student population data reinforces the need to locate the project in BVHP where it belongs.

In addition, LEJ seems to have lost sight of the fact that the “Living Classroom” is intended to be a resource for adults as well as youth. Relocating to McLaren Park eliminates the opportunity for the building to act as a community center for BVHP where evening and weekend classes and community meetings could be held.

The schools’ report on which LEJ relies asserts that students will walk one mile in 12 to 15 minutes. Other data clearly report that the 15 minute mile is a seasoned jogger’s pace. Any teacher who has taken a class on a field trip will attest the students’ sheep like pace averages 45 minutes to one hour on flat ground. More realistically, the average time to an from the McLaren Park “living classroom” location would be approximately 53 minutes in each direction, not the 12 to 15 minutes reported by LEJ. If elevation considerations had been taken into account, the walking travel times would be far greater than what is calculated here; e.g., E.R. Taylor School being at an elevation of 150 ft. relative to the proposed site at 400 ft. - the equivalent of climbing a 22 story building.

The “community approved” argument. LEJ reports that community leaders in BVHP approved the relocation of the project from their district to McLaren Park. The report begs the question: What choices were they given? If the question was: Would you prefer to have the “living classroom” in your district or in McLaren Park? it is inconceivable that the leaders would have betrayed community residents who have been fighting for attention and resources for decades. The implied betrayal begs the additional question: Were the same community leaders and members who supported the project concept in the first instance and who supported construction at the Heron’s Head Park site consulted about the relocation plan? From all

indications, the question asked was: Given that there is no site and/or sufficient funding for construction of the project in your district, would you prefer to have it constructed in the McLaren Park or forego the project altogether? Such a limiting qualification should invalidate the choice.

The RPD offered the park space The department is extremely versed in the need for well executed community process. McLaren Park already serves as recreation and outdoor classroom space for numerous communities including among others the Portola District, Visitacion Valley, the Excelsior District and several who actively promote the preservation of open and natural space. The department knows that their participation in any consideration of surrendering open space, let alone any secondary consideration as to the nature of the construction for which the space would be used, should be the first order of business. The department also knows before it could offer park must be vetted in a thorough community process and with the RPD Commission and the Planning Commission. None of these requirements have been satisfied to date.

The McLaren Park Site and the Environmental Justice Issue

Is LEJ's objective to have the building constructed on scarce open space consistent with its mission to impart the value of preserving, restoring and protecting the environment and open space?

The value that might be realized by the proposed construction cannot in any way compensate for the further reduction in open space that would result. It would also serve as an object lesson contradicting what the organization espouses.

Does the proposal to construct the "living classroom" building in the park conform with the policies and values expressed in the San Francisco General Plan?

It does not. Among its many guiding principles, the General Plan forcefully advocates for the preservation and restoration of open space and parks. The plan also espouses removal of existing buildings from open spaces and calls for the enforcement of a standing prohibition against the construction of non-recreational facilities in open spaces and parks. The policies are summarized in the plan's following statements:

The City should gradually eliminate non recreational uses in its public open spaces. In the past parks and playgrounds have been used as sites for public facilities such as libraries, fire and police stations, sewer plants and schools. (emphasis added)

and,

The City's policy should be made clear: where new recreation and cultural buildings are needed they should be located outside of existing parks and playgrounds.

In effect, the LEJ proposal violates the spirit and the letter of the General Plan.

What instruction about the environment can be imparted from a new building that cannot be imparted in the students' primary classrooms and/or in the community building that already exists in the park?

Traditionally, environment teachers have used the outside environment as the most effective “living classroom” - a classroom that gives substance and reality to what has been learned in classroom texts. However, the project envisions construction of a new enclosed building in which to teach youth about the outside environment. The idea of bringing youth from inside their own enclosed classrooms to the inside of yet another enclosed building to teach them about the outside environment that exists on the building’s door step doesn’t appear to make much sense.

To whatever extent some of the instruction must take place inside a building, why aren’t any one or all the many (94134) area schools identified by LEJ adequate? The shortage of schools in the BVHP further argues for construction of the new classroom in that location.

Finally, McLaren Park already has a club house that accommodates the “Kids in Parks” and WALC programs - both very active and effective programs that are devoted to teaching youth about the environment. In addition, a vacant caretakers house could be refurbished and tailored to satisfy LEJ’s indoor space need. Both of these options assume that LEJ is able to justify developing the Living Classroom outside of the BVHP where it is most needed.

In summary, it appears that LEJ’s plan to relocate the “living classroom” from the BVHP is inconsistent with the organization’s own values and our sense of social and environmental justice.

Friends of McLaren Park