



September 25, 2025

Charles Collins, President, and Commissioners  
San Francisco Arts Commission  
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place  
Room 416  
San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear President Collins, and Commissioners:

The [Vaillancourt Fountain and Lawrence Halprin-designed Embarcadero Plaza](#) are as unique to San Francisco as Coit Tower, the Ferry Building, and the Transamerica Pyramid Center. All these landmarks define San Francisco. However, unlike the latter three, the Vaillancourt Fountain and Embarcadero Plaza have not been well-maintained, and their diminished condition is being weaponized as justification for their demolition; and demolition is being presented as the only viable option.

That's ridiculous and commission members should not fall for this ruse. The Vaillancourt Fountain and Embarcadero Plaza can be rehabilitated to meet current needs and uses without destroying the very characteristics and artistry that make them unique. In fact, the City of Minneapolis provides an excellent roadmap for doing so.

[Peavey Plaza](#) (1974) in Minneapolis, a Modernist park/plaza designed by landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg with distinct and dramatic water features, like Vaillancourt, is in the heart of the city and due to deferred maintenance and lack of programming had fallen on hard times. The complex infrastructure issues that currently bedevil Vaillancourt were all present at Peavey. Initial plans called for demolishing the park; however, after years of hearings, advocacy at a national and local level, and a lawsuit, the city reversed course and rehabilitated Peavey Plaza. The result has been widely hailed, including by the same officials who actively campaigned for the site's demolition (and who said there was no alternative to demolition), and recognized with numerous awards, including a major global honor recently from World Landscape Architecture and recent coverage in [Metropolis magazine](#). Peavey Plaza is also operated and programmed by the city's partner, the [Minneapolis Downtown Development Improvement District](#). Indeed, the same type of stewardship relationship also exists with the [Halprin Landscape Conservancy](#) in Portland, Oregon, which serves as "stewards of the fountain district."

Another ruse the commission should not fall for concerns the budgets and estimates coming from the Recreation and Park Department (RPD). The 122-page report [Vaillancourt Fountain Conditions Assessment](#) prepared by RPD consultants Page & Turnbull includes an RPD memo that claims the fountain has "historically required extensive, near-daily maintenance" and that has "averaged approximately \$100,000 per year, inclusive of documented labor costs, travel and equipment time, material handling, and additional support activities which reflect tens of thousands of cumulative labor hours." RPD spokespeople were quoted for months in the media making the claim.

The Cultural Landscape Foundation (TCLF), a Washington, D.C.-based education and advocacy non-profit established in 1998, FOIA'ed RPD for documents to support their claims. The [response RPD sent to TCLF](#) showed that:

1. **RPD had inflated the average annual budget by 250%**
2. **The “tens of thousands of cumulative labor hours” is actually 1,578.**

Even if these numbers are “to be taken with a grain of salt,” as RPD’s Director of Operations Eric Andersen cautioned in a [memo accompanying](#) the estimates, **they vastly exceed a rounding error.**

This is the same RPD that [said in June 205](#) the cost to restore the Vaillancourt Fountain was \$12 to \$17 million and [two months later said](#) it’s actually \$29 million (and portentously warns this would consume nearly all of the \$30-35 million needed for a proposed new park).

**Absent an audit by a neutral third party, the RPD’s restoration estimate should be treated with extreme skepticism.**

In addition, the public forums run by RPD soliciting input about proposals for Embarcadero Plaza and the Vaillancourt Fountain only offered a *tabula rasa* approach and **did not present the public with a rehabilitation option.** Consequently, any representations by RPD about what the public wants are fundamentally flawed and woefully incomplete. The public’s choices have been deliberately limited.

TCLF has been advocating on behalf of Embarcadero Plaza and the Vaillancourt Fountain since 2016 when the site was included in a [traveling photographic exhibition](#) about Lawrence Halprin’s legacy organized by TCLF; the exhibition debuted at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., and was hosted at the Palace of Fine Arts in 2017. Sadly, since then the fountain and plaza’s condition has deteriorated because of insufficient maintenance. Nevertheless, while its condition is diminished, its integrity is very high. Indeed, TCLF continues to advocate for listing the plaza and fountain in the National Register of Historic Places.

**Even in its diminished physical condition, there is no other place in the world like Embarcadero Plaza and the Vaillancourt Fountain. None.**

They are immediately identifiable with the city and emblematic of its distinct and remarkable spirit. The publicly available renderings of the proposed replacement are trite, generic, and lacking in imagination—a kit of parts devoid of artistic value and civic gravitas, and unworthy of the City of San Francisco.

On behalf of TCLF, I respectfully urge the Commissioners not to fall prey to the false choices and suspect data being provided by RPD and to the misguided notion that demolition is *a fait accompli*.

Please heed the example of the City of Minneapolis and work with stakeholders to support a rehabilitation of this nationally significant work of art. TCLF stands ready to help.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of a stylized 'C' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR