

## Continuing the Work of Generations



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

*The Club is making great progress with its project to build a new home on San Francisco's Embarcadero. This is a good time to explore the history of this organization as we prepare for our brand new home.*

**T**he Commonwealth Club, America's oldest and largest civic forum, is an institution that is key to the democratic process nationally, regionally in California and the West, and locally in San Francisco and the Bay Area.

The Club was founded in San Francisco in 1903, in the aftermath of violent conflict in California over land use between agriculture and the railroads, which raised questions about the capacity of government and society to manage such difficult issues. The Club is a Progressive-era institution dedicated to citizen self-education and open discussion of important issues to engage citizens in improving public policy and society.

The Club's founders first named it The Agora, which in ancient Greece was a central place in a city for public assembly, arts and culture. It was soon renamed The Commonwealth Club, to indicate its mission as a public service group to serve the common "weal" (sound, healthy, prosperous state). The Club's early mottos were "Get the Facts" and to "Find Truth and Let It Loose in the World." More recently, the Club says that it helps to keep its members and the public "In the Know."

The Club's founders were Edward F. Adams, editorial writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*; John P. Young, managing editor of the *Chronicle*; Benjamin Ide Wheeler, president of the University of California; Frederic Burk, president of San Francisco Normal School (now San Francisco State University); and William P. Lawlor, Superior Court judge and later California Supreme Court justice.

The Club's 22,000 members, mostly in the Bay Area, are from all walks of life – the professions, teaching, government, business, students, labor, retirees and technology professionals. What they have in common is a commitment to being informed and contributing to the public good as engaged citizens.

The Club holds more than 400 public panel discussions, speeches, debates and town hall meetings each year on all kinds of topics, including the economy, foreign policy, the environment, energy,

medicine, health, science and technology, nutrition, agriculture, urban planning, transportation, constitutional rights, civil rights, animal rights, war and peace, leadership, governance, defense, terrorism, sustainability, entrepreneurship, philanthropy, architecture and design, sports, culture, history, and virtually every field related to human endeavor and the natural world.

Policymakers and thought leaders have often chosen the Club to make important public policy statements, which have then been debated locally and throughout the nation. Teddy Roosevelt coined and defined the term "conservation" at the Club in 1911, Woodrow Wilson took his case for the League of Nations to the American people through the Club in 1919, and FDR made his historic New Deal speech at the Club in 1932. This process continued as Bush administration officials talked about and debated the war in Iraq with San Francisco citizens, U.S. and NATO military leaders have discussed the war in Afghanistan, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi has outlined and heard input on plans for federal financial system reforms, and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger announced and discussed his climate change initiatives at the Club.

Club forums and reports contributed to reform in California, including establishing the initiative process (1911), creating judicial recall elections (1912), reducing air pollution from factories (1913), establishing public defenders' offices (1921), creating an explanatory handbook with pro and con statements to accompany election ballots, creating a state water plan (1930s–1960), and many other public policy issues.

In more recent years, the Club's "Voices of Reform" project from 2003–2006 resulted in the creation of a new organization, California Forward. CAForward is improving state governance in California through measures such as creating the California Citizens Redistricting Commission and pursuing reform of the budget process. Eight years ago, the Club created Climate One, a dialogue between scientists, business, governments and other fields on how to address the threat of global warming.

Our mission continues to the current day. This August, the Club hosted a 22-part series, *The LGBT Journey*, highlighting the social, cultural and political evolution of the gay rights movement. And we are holding a forum this fall on San Francisco's proposed "soda tax."

The Club is strictly non-partisan and takes no position on issues. But through its convening power and reputation for neutrality, the Club has often brought together stakeholders concerned with an issue to work on solutions, thus contributing to solving problems and improving the human condition.

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