



InSight

WITH DR. GLORIA C. DUFFY
President & CEO, The Commonwealth Club

110 The Embarcadero, Here We Come!

For 109 years, the Commonwealth Club has served its members and the community from rented space in San Francisco. Its locations have been as varied as a suite at the St. Francis Hotel, offices in the historic Monadnock Building on Market Street, and for the past 26 years, space in a high rise at the corner of Market and Second Streets. The story is legendary that the founders of the Club sought a home from the beginning in 1903, but the search was derailed first by the earthquake and fire of 1906 and subsequently by the cost of San Francisco real estate and other factors. The Club is perhaps the only major cultural institution based in San Francisco that has not had its own headquarters.

Now that situation will change. In mid-2013, the Club's 110th year, the Club will finally move to its own home, at 110 The Embarcadero. Last June, when the commercial real estate market was at its nadir, the Club's leadership seized the opportunity and signed a contract to purchase a small building on San Francisco's Embarcadero. We have been raising funds ever since, to complete the purchase by October of this year. Then we will launch into renovations to be completed by next July, when the Club will move in.

The building the Club is purchasing – which runs through the block from the Embarcadero to Steuart Street – is essentially a shell, but one in a location that could not be more ideal. We polled Club members, and you told us that the convenience of being located near downtown and public transportation was very important to you. There is probably no single location in the Bay Area more easily accessible than the Club's new site. It is across the street from the Ferry terminal, 3 blocks from the Embarcadero BART station, a few blocks from the new TransBay Terminal, walking distance from downtown, right on MUNI bus and trolley lines and near onramps to major freeways and the Bay Bridge.

We feel very lucky to have taken the step we did to acquire this site in 2011, because a rapid escalation of San Francisco commercial real estate prices is now underway. The Club has recently been notified by its landlord at 2nd and Market of a planned rent increase of at least 75 percent when our lease expires next year. The cost of leasing downtown space, which was already expensive for the Club as a nonprofit organization, would overstrain our budget by mid-year next year.

The Club's building effort is led by two committees. A Building Committee is co-chaired by Board members Richard Pivnicka and Joe Epstein, and has worked on the identification, acquisition and design of a building. The Campaign Cabinet is chaired by Board Chair Maryles Casto. This Cabinet is leading the fundraising effort. We are honored that former Secretary of State George Shultz and San Francisco Chief of Protocol Charlotte Mailliard Shultz are the Honorary Chairs of our building campaign.

With generous donors having pledged almost enough now for the building purchase, which is just 50 percent of the total cost of this project, we are continuing to raise the remainder of the funds needed for renovation of the building. While we continue to keep the Club's public affairs programming going at its normal pace, many staff members and volunteers are deeply engaged in this effort. Virtually all of the Club's board has donated to the building fund, and many board members are working on the various committees to either raise funds or plan the building renovation.

The Club plans a green retrofit of the two-story building that makes efficient use of energy and other resources, and a comfortable and welcoming environment for our members and the public, while preserving the historic quality of this building and the neighborhood. Our future home is next door to the Audiffred Building, built in 1889 and the oldest surviving building on San Francisco's waterfront.

The Club's new home itself has a significant history in the development of the San Francisco waterfront and the labor movement. In the 1930s, when it bore the address of 113 Steuart Street, it was the hall belonging to the International Longshoremen's Association, the labor organization led by Harry Bridges. This location played a role in the San Francisco General Strike of 1934, in the Pacific Coast Dock Strike, and particularly in the events of "Bloody Thursday" in July of 1934, during which two striking dockworkers were killed. The Club will recognize this San Francisco history through preserving the building's Steuart Street façade, and by presenting information on the events that took place at the site.

It's a wonderful location for the Club for its second century and beyond, and we look forward to welcoming you there next year. 🐾