

Exploratorium @ Piers 15 & 17

Summary of Project Approvals



The Exploratorium is an interactive science museum with exhibits, workshop, classroom, and conference areas, cafes and museum store, Exploratorium's administrative offices, and over 99,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor public access areas with interactive exhibits. Piers 15 and 17 are contributing structures in the Embarcadero Historic District. Pier 15 has been seismically retrofitted; Pier 17 has been repaired. Maritime space for Bay Delta Tug and Tow has been rebuilt, as well as major repairs to continue deep water vessel berthing along the pier's eastern edge. Within a year after its 2013 opening, Exploratorium enjoyed more than 1 million visitors annually, a 50% increase from its former location.

Historic Preservation

The Pier 15 bulkhead and shed were seismically retrofitted and improved to integrate with a new observatory building at the east end, consistent with Secretary Standards. Repairs to Pier 17 shed, new Bay Delta headquarters, and maritime berths also comply with Secretary Standards. In meeting these standards, the project qualified for federal historic tax credits, fundamental to financing the Pier 15 portion of the project. The pier deck "valley" between Pier 15 and 17 was not historic, and thus was removed to open up Bay waters to the sky, a BCDC objective.

State Lands Commission (SLC)

The Port sought affirmation from

State Lands Commission that the project is consistent with the Burton Act and the common law public trust. SLC issued a letter including the below reasons for finding the project to be consistent with public trust objectives:

- Preservation of an important historic maritime asset (Pier 15, and eventually Pier 17)
- Significant public trust uses within and around the pier structures, including maritime business facility improvements, restaurant uses and a museum store which is open to the general public
- A robust public access program throughout the site, including alternate public access routes

when the east apron is in use for vessel berthing

Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC)

The project required two approvals by the BCDC Commission: 1) an amendment to the San Francisco Waterfront Special Area Plan (“Special Area Plan”); and 2) a Major Permit.

Special Area Plan Amendment

The Special Area Plan previously required the removal of the entire deck area in the valley between Piers 15 and 17, and a non-historic connector shed at the east end of the pier. Exploratorium proposed amendments to allow retention of portions of the valley for public access and construction of a new observatory building at the east end. BCDC required offsetting fill removal requirements at another site with specific conditions, and a public view corridor requirement between Piers 15 and 17.

BCDC Major Permit

As with most Major Permit projects, the Exploratorium underwent seismic and structural review by BCDC’s Engineering Criteria Review Board, and urban and architectural review by BCDC’s Design Review Board (DRB). Recommendations from these bodies inform BCDC staff review and Major Permit recommendations, which require approval by the BCDC Commission. BCDC’s approval of the Special Area Plan set the frame for details that were approved in the Major Permit, which included the below key findings and requirements:

- The public-oriented museum, ancillary commercial uses and public access program was consistent with public trust objectives.
- Project engineering and structural design, with associated permit conditions, were appropriate to address major earthquake risk, while also minimizing the amount of fill to be placed in the Bay.
- The Port and Exploratorium were responsible for removing additional fill elsewhere, to achieve same or more fill removal as required in the prior Special Area Plan policies.
- The project met BCDC’s maximum feasible public access standard, including a Port commitment to improve a key crosswalk to improve public safety by visitors to the project (completed 2014).

San Francisco Planning Department & Board of Supervisors

The Planning Department, as lead agency for the California Environmental Quality Act, certified a Final EIR, reviewed historic preservation reports, and participated in review of the project’s design, as part of the Waterfront Design Advisory Committee process. The Port lease was approved by the Board of Supervisors, following Port Commission approvals.

Regulatory Approval Summary	
✓	Rehabilitation consistent with Secretary of the Interior Standards for Historic Properties (“Secretary Standards”) via federal tax credits
✓	State Lands Commission - Public Trust consistency determination
✓	BCDC approvals of Special Area Plan amendments and a Major Permit
✓	Design review by BCDC Design Review Board and City’s Waterfront Design Advisory Committee
✓	Port Commission & Board of Supervisors – Approval of long-term lease and development agreement
✓	Regional Water Quality Control Board NPDES permit (for Bay heating and cooling system)
✓	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers nationwide permit for floating dock

