

The port of San Francisco in transition

From 1863 until 1968, the port of San Francisco was controlled by a State Board of Harbor Commissioners, exempt from local control and backed by the vast financial resources of the state. The State Board guided the port from its infancy to the height of its maritime industrial activity during the Second World War. Post-Second World War, the rise of foreign competition in shipbuilding and repair dealt a severe blow to the port. In addition, the shift from break-bulk to containerized shipping reduced demand for San Francisco's cargo facilities. Today, despite significant investments to modernize its facilities, the port of San Francisco remains a niche port for cargo. San Francisco's remaining cargo operations take place at only a few piers in the far southern quadrant of the city, leaving the northeastern port lands ripe for redevelopment.

From the outset, the port's efforts to reuse its northeastern lands have been fraught with controversy. The State Board's early plans for redevelopment of the northeastern waterfront were clearly out of step with local views on appropriate waterfront uses. First, the State Board rejected surface level transportation improvements to the waterfront's Embarcadero Roadway because of concern that non-port traffic would interfere with the reuse of the port's finger piers. Instead, like so many waterfronts across the nation, in 1957 an elevated freeway was erected along San Francisco Bay, effectively removing the downtown waterfront from public view and use. Second, a plan generated by the state's World Trade Center Authority and endorsed by the governor called for construction of 7- and 30-story buildings to replace the historic Ferry Building. Third, in 1959, the State Board's "Embarcadero City" plan envisioned filling in the bay north of the Ferry Building to accommodate high-rise structures for non-maritime uses. The efforts of outraged citizens led to a groundswell of citizen opposition to the elevated freeway. Construction of the downtown portion of the freeway occurred before this citizen opposition ended the construction mid-span and the waterfront high-rise projects never got off the ground.

After these failures, responsibility for port lands transferred from the state to the city in 1968. As a condition of the transfer, the state required the city to create the Port Commission. The Commission holds complete authority to take all actions necessary to fulfill its public trust responsibilities to promote maritime commerce, navigation and fisheries, as well as to protect natural resources and develop recreational facilities for public use on port lands. To ensure that port assets would not be raided by the city, the transfer agreement required that the port remain financially independent of the city and revenues generated by the port only be used for trust purposes. Thus, although the port is structured much like other city departments (for example, its Commission is appointed by the mayor), it is unique in that it must further statewide interests and do so without monies from the city's general fund. Moreover, its duties are extremely varied.

Unlike some ports, which primarily manage shipping and/or airport operations, the port of San Francisco oversees a broad range of commercial, maritime and public activities. In some areas, like Fisherman's Wharf,