

Neighborhood Transit Centers

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The Rationale

In September 2010, members of the Russian Hill Community Association (RHCA) met with District 3 Supervisor David Chiu about the proposal to convert Russian Hill's early 20th century Community Parking Facility at 1945 Hyde St. into seven luxury condos, with a resulting loss of 58+ off-street parking spaces used by residents, visitors, tourists and commercial district customers. At that time, the RHCA was addressing the proposed conversion's impact on the adjacent historic Russell Street, on neighborhood residents who use the off-street parking, and on merchants who rely on the hourly parking provided to sustain their businesses.

Since that meeting, the RHCA Project Team identified a critical relationship between the fate of 1945 Hyde St. and the future of successful transit in San Francisco. Enlightened by UC Davis Professor Mark Kessler's article on the- early 20th century auto repair/parking facilities in San Francisco,ⁱ the Project Team discovered:

- Of the 300+/- auto repair/parking facilities listed in the City's 1928 directory, almost two-thirds are gone. The most recent loss was 1461 Pine, demolished in April 2011.
- Of the 130+/- remaining facilities, most are still actively serving their neighborhoods with both auto repair and parking services.

The fate of these facilities whenever their auto-repair life is over depends on whether policy makers can see the critical role of these uses as the neighborhood component of San Francisco's successful multi-modal transportation system. Such a role would extend and amplify San Francisco's Transit First policy and investment. Increasing modal choice at the neighborhood level would also reduce car ownership, VMT, and GHG emissions.

Evolution from 20th Century Neighborhood Garages into 21st Century Neighborhood Transit Centers

Because of their unique qualities of scale and location, these early 20th century facilities present a remarkable opportunity. They can be converted into Neighborhood Transit Centers housing bike share/car share/ZipCars/electric vehicle charging stations/transportation information/off-street parking/hourly parking for commercial districts, etc. Linked by walking and bicycle paths and supported by local transit, NCTs will meet a majority of resident, visitor, and tourist trip needs.

Once lost, these structures can never be replaced. There is no City space for equally sized structures to be built. An invaluable opportunity to extend the transportation related life of these facilities will disappear forever.

Interest in NCTs is Growing in San Francisco.

- Tom Nolan, Chair of the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency has found the idea worth consideration and introduced us to additional contacts for further exploration.

Rationale, cont.

- Director Dong Yee of SFMTA’s Sustainable Streets and Deputy Director of Planning Tim Papandreou said the concept is “interesting” and have offered to pull together an informal group of transit experts to refine the concept and assess implementation options.
- Leah Shaum and the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition are reviewing the concept.
- Discussions with Rick Hutchinson of City Car Share are on-going to refine the concept and pencil out numbers.

Protective Legislation is Urgently Needed

Legislation is critically needed is to maintain these uses and facilities so that they can evolve into NCTs. Subsequently, the SFMTA, the Planning Department, the Department of the Environment, and other stakeholders can develop a strategic plan to maximize their value to San Francisco. In addition, a range of implementation programs can be developed in partnership with interested nonprofits and operators to stimulate their evolution, from NCT Trusts, to funding and developing demonstration projects. These programs would salvage the presently at-risk land use asset and transform it into a new 21st century sustainable transportation services industry.

Preparing a strategic plan and executing initial demonstration projects will take some time. In the meantime, the at-risk inventory of existing auto services/parking uses must be maintained in current uses. Development of a network of Neighborhood Transit Centers (NTCs) would be an essential component of the future multi-modal transportation infrastructure of a prosperous, resilient, post-carbon San Francisco that would meet all of the trip needs of San Francisco residents, visitors and tourists. This NTC network would also extend and amplify San Francisco’s Transit First policy and be one component of a reasonable and realistic neighborhood parking policy. It would reduce car ownership, VMTs, and GHG emissions. The City cannot afford to lose existing off-street neighborhood parking and transportation uses that are an integral part of the neighborhood fabric. Protection is needed now.

Legislative Change: Conditional Use Authorization or a Moratorium?

Legislation to change the Planning Code to require Conditional Use Authorization before neighborhood auto repair/parking facilities can be converted to non-transit uses, would provide the City and the affected communities an opportunity to review each proposed project and make a determination on a case-by-case basis. A Moratorium on any change in use or demolition might meet the same objective. The RHCA Project Team has prepared draft legislation for Conditional Use Authorization as one protective alternative.

Mark Kessler’s raw data lists 130+/- buildings, most still in active use, although some have been converted and some recently demolished. A rough breakdown by District shows the number of early 20th century auto repair/parking facilities still standing as follows:

TOTAL 20 th Century Auto Repair/Parking Facilities Per District		
District 1	Eric Mar	5
District 2	Mark Farrell	20
District 3	David Chiu	38 (or 26%)
District 5	Ross Mirkarimi	14

Rationale, cont.

District 6	Jane Kim	60 (or 42%)
District 8	Scott Weiner	3
District 9	David Campos	4
Total		144

Given this District distribution, it would appear that Legislation for a Moratorium on conversion or demolition or Conditional-Use Legislation would be co-sponsored by Supervisor Chiu, Supervisor Kim, Supervisor Farrell and Supervisor Mirkarimi.

ⁱ Kessler, Mark, "Educate, Preserve, Reuse: The Good (Not Great) Garage Buildings of San Francisco." University of California, Davis. 2008 (report available on request).