

Kaiser, Stop Lobbying and Start Listening

Side by side editorials published in the San Francisco Chronicle in February made arguments both for and against the proposed Kaiser Permanente project in Potrero Hill. Former San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos made a compelling case in support of Save The Hill's alliance with Bayview community leaders to relocate the proposed development to their medically underserved neighborhood. In contrast, Randy Wittorp, the public affairs director for Kaiser in San Francisco, offered a series of generalizations, mischaracterizations and misstatements in his argument in favor of the Potrero Hill proposal. Here's an overview, paragraph by paragraph:

Decentralization

According to Wittorp, Kaiser Permanente is "working with the city to create a more decentralized approach to providing health care services." Kaiser's initial presentations to Potrero Hill residents and businesses seemed to support this concept: in their words the new project was intended to specifically serve Potrero Hill and nearby neighborhoods in the city's southeast area, including Dogpatch, Showplace Square, and Bayview-Hunters Point. But in his editorial Wittorp stretches that geographic reach significantly by arguing that the Potrero Hill site is "ideally situated for tens of thousands" of San Francisco Kaiser patients, including many from "downtown." In doing so, Wittorp lets Kaiser's real agenda slip: decentralization may sound good, but what the healthcare giant really wants is a second major medical complex to rival their current Geary Street site – a new city foothold that will draw a huge customer base from a wide geographic pool. In fact, Kaiser's own planning documents state that the proposed Potrero Hill medical "campus" would serve upwards of 97,000 San Francisco Kaiser members, including "the growing population at Mission Bay" as well as customers as far away as Brisbane in San Mateo County.

Given the true scope of Kaiser's proposed project, the importance of finding a genuinely "ideal" location gains even greater weight. And while Wittorp asserts that Potrero Hill is the best location for a new medical complex the company's own membership statistics argue otherwise:*

Ingelside-Excelsior/Crocker-Amazon: 12.6%

Inner Mission/Bernal Heights: 9.5%

Visitacion Valley: 6.2%

Bayview/Hunters Point: 4.7%

Potrero Hill: 2.8%

South of Market: 2.7%

According to these numbers a new Kaiser facility would be best located in Bayview-Hunters Point, a geographic mid-point between Ingelside-Excelsior and South of Market. Selecting a Bayview-Hunters Point location would also align Kaiser with an important City planning goal. In order to redress medical inequity and disparities in access to healthcare, San Francisco policy (as outlined in recommendations of the Health Care Services Master Plan Task Force) calls for new medical services to be located where they're needed most. Starting in 2011 the Health Care Task Force (of which Wittorp himself was a member) held four community meetings to articulate the needs of neighborhoods known to have high levels of health care disparity. Potrero Hill was not among them. The neighborhoods of Bayview and Visitacion Valley were, and the Task Force later identified these areas to be among the city's most medically underserved communities.

So why is Kaiser committed to their proposed Potrero Hill site? In their own words the "premier location offers a unique opportunity to showcase the Kaiser Permanente brand and integrated model in the competitive San Francisco healthcare market." It's a marquee location for Kaiser, nothing more.

Alternate Sites

Wittorp states that selection of the currently proposed Potrero Hill building site came after a three-year exploration of several possible locations. Save The Hill has repeatedly asked Kaiser for a list of these additional sites (which Kaiser claims to number at least 60) but the organization has been unresponsive. Additionally, they have provided no evidence to support the depth or breadth of their search. The Kaiser representative in charge of site selection openly admitted at a meeting with Save The Hill that their previous due diligence evaluation of the large Bayview location (now being advocated by that neighborhood) involved nothing more than a Google Earth search. Additionally, under California's governing environmental law (CEQA), the City of San Francisco is obligated to identify environmentally superior alternatives that include site locations that pose fewer significant impacts. By this measure the Bayview site, which sits on the Third Street commercial corridor within a community designated "health activity node", is the environmentally superior location: it is adjacent to a significant means of public transit with the Third Street light rail, it is not congested by heavy traffic, and construction will not undermine the existing character of the neighborhood or set a bad precedent for future development.

Community Benefit

Wittorp boasts that Kaiser has a long history of "community benefit work" and "partnerships with community organizations". And yet nothing in their current proposal outlines any benefit to non-Kaiser members living in Potrero Hill. Moreover, Wittorp fails to address the central issue of medical inequity in our district. Bayview is one of the most medically underserved areas of the city while Potrero Hill already has close access to major health care facilities. So while a Kaiser medical complex isn't necessary or needed for Potrero Hill it would make a positive and dramatic difference in the Bayview. By ignoring this, Kaiser fails in its pledge to serve the medically underserved.

Transit

Wittorp touts the city's long-term goal to make 16th Street a "major transit corridor" in a "greener, more transit-friendly city". But Kaiser's proposal does nothing to either support or invest in this vision. Instead, Kaiser's proposed three story, 300,000 square foot, 563 space underground parking garage mocks the City's "Transit First" policy by perpetuating a car-dependent model of development. If Kaiser truly believes in the city's ability to deliver greater public transport why do they need so much parking? And why do they plan to rely heavily on private shuttles? In all likelihood it's because they've read the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency's (SFMTA) own projections that the future 22-Fillmore line serving an extended 16th Street transit corridor will be overburdened from the start -- constrained by funding challenges, inadequate bus capacity and service, rising amounts of automobile and truck congestion, and uncertainty about the future of the Caltrain tracks, High Speed Rail, and the I-280 freeway. Wittorp also ignores the fact that Kaiser's own internal studies show its medical facility will draw thousands of new cars (upwards of 4,400 daily) into Potrero Hill. Even without a major new medical complex, SFMTA's own forecast through 2035 projects that the intersection at 7th, 16th, and Mississippi Streets will "degrade" to a service level of "F" -- among the worst in the city.

Transparency & Community Engagement

Wittorp states: "Kaiser Permanente has been transparent throughout this process and has been actively engaged with the Potrero Hill community and the city." This is simply untrue. Kaiser did no outreach in Potrero Hill before presenting a set of fully realized plans and drawings to the community in late summer of 2012 *after* they had already submitted applications for approval of the development to the San Francisco planning department. Since filing their application Kaiser has lobbied the Planning Department for a "Community Plan Exemption" in an effort to sidestep more rigorous environmental

review of their proposal and speed up their construction timeline. (In their application Kaiser anticipated ground breaking on the proposed Potrero Hill site in March – July of 2013.) Had Kaiser taken the time to meet with a wide range of Potrero Hill residents and business leaders (especially those businesses on 16th and 17th Streets) they would have been better informed about the unique needs and goals of the neighborhood and would have saved themselves from the bitter fight they're now in.

By contrast, if Kaiser had engaged with the Southeastern Neighborhoods as a whole they would have discovered that neighborhoods like the Bayview both need and want greater access to medical services as well as new large-scale development. Instead, in response to the strong (and apparently unexpected) opposition encountered in Potrero Hill, Kaiser has loaded up on pricey PR lobbying firms – including the “hired gun” San Francisco firm Barbary Coast Consulting -- in a bid to sell their development to Potrero Hill residents and to discourage Bayview residents from advocating for relocation.

Wittorp's editorial and Kaiser Permanente's current proposal are both disingenuous and disheartening. For a non-profit that reported *net profit* of \$2.6 billion in 2012 it's not unreasonable for our community to expect them to exercise true due diligence, honest neighborhood engagement, and genuine sensitivity to the needs of the neighborhoods they hope to serve. If they want us to “Thrive” they should stop lobbying and start listening.

*Source: 2012 Kaiser Institutional Master Plan

