



## PUBLIC NOTICE

# Notice of Preparation of Environmental Impact Report

*Date:* September 23, 2020  
*Case No.:* **2018-013597ENV**  
*Project Title:* **Portsmouth Square Improvement Project**  
*Zoning:* P (Public) Use District  
OS (Open Space) Height and Bulk District  
*Block/Lot:* Assessor's Block 0209/Lot 017  
*Project Sponsor:* Michael Degregorio, San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, 628.652.6649,  
[michael.degregorio@sfgov.org](mailto:michael.degregorio@sfgov.org)  
*Staff Contact:* Rachel Schuett, 628.652.7546, [rachel.schuett@sfgov.org](mailto:rachel.schuett@sfgov.org)

### Introduction

The San Francisco Planning Department has prepared this Notice of Preparation (NOP) of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) in connection with the project listed above. The purpose of the EIR is to provide information about the potential significant physical environmental effects of the proposed project, to identify possible ways to minimize the project's significant adverse effects, and to describe and analyze possible alternatives to the proposed project. The San Francisco Planning Department is issuing this NOP to inform the public and responsible and interested agencies about the proposed project and the intent to prepare an EIR. This NOP is also available online at: <https://sfplanning.org/environmental-review-documents>. To communicate with the Planning Department in Chinese, please contact the staff person listed above by phone and leave a voicemail message.

### Project Summary

The San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department proposes to implement the Portsmouth Square Improvement Project (proposed project), which would replace the existing park features with a redesigned public park that would include new playgrounds, exercise equipment, shade structures, wayfinding, signage, sidewalks, planters, terraces, ramps, and a new 7,500-square-foot community clubhouse facility. The project would also waterproof the roof of the parking garage located underneath the park and remove portions of the pedestrian bridge spanning Kearny Street that connects a 27-story hotel building (currently managed as a Hilton) with Portsmouth Square.

## Project Location and Site Characteristics

The 1.5-acre project site is generally bounded by Washington Street to the north, Kearny Street to the east, Clay Street to the south, and Walter U Lum Place to the west (see **Figure 1, Project Location**). For translated figures, please contact the staff person, listed above. The site contains Portsmouth Square, which is a public park located in the Chinatown neighborhood at 733 Kearny Street. The park is the main public space in the Chinatown neighborhood and provides open space for recreational activities and community events. The park is accessible by foot at each corner of the square, and by transit via the 8X, 8AX, and 8BX routes that stop on the west side of Kearny Street near the intersection of Clay and Kearny streets. Vehicular parking is provided in a public parking garage below the park. In addition, the park connects to the Hilton Hotel via a pedestrian bridge that extends between Portsmouth Square and the third floor of the Hilton Hotel, over Kearny Street. The bridge includes a series of concrete benches on either side of the walkway. Located on the Hilton's third floor is the Chinese Culture Center (a 20,000-square-foot facility that includes a 350-seat auditorium, a visual art center, a book shop, a conference room, and offices).<sup>1</sup>

Portsmouth Square is on an easterly facing slope and rises from an elevation of approximately 30 feet above sea level on the east to about 50 feet above sea level on the west. The existing two-level park conforms to the natural topography of the site. The upper level contains a 4,000-square-foot event space and plaza, a covered pavilion, restrooms, elevators, and a play structure. The lower level contains scattered smaller spaces including a 1,600-square-foot indoor clubhouse beneath the pedestrian bridge, a play structure, a trellis, benches, and walkways. Beneath the park is the Portsmouth Square Garage, which was constructed in 1961 and contains four levels of public parking (500 spaces) approximately 26 feet below Kearny Street and 49 feet below Walter U Lum Place. The Portsmouth Square Garage is commonly used as a parking location for access to Chinatown.

## Site History

Established in the early 19th century, Portsmouth Square is San Francisco's first public open space and predates the City of San Francisco. It was originally a modest dirt plaza that served as the civic and commercial hub of the early settlement of Yerba Buena. During the City's founding and transformation from the mid-19th century onward, Portsmouth Square served as a backdrop to some of the most important moments in city and state history: the site of the first City Hall and California's first public school; the Gold Rush; a staging ground and place of refuge after the 1906 earthquake; and community festivals, parades, and other affirmations of civic pride.

Currently, San Francisco's Chinatown is one of the most densely-populated urban areas west of Manhattan, with a high concentration of senior citizens and single-room occupancy dwellings. Nestled amid office towers and neighborhood shops, Portsmouth Square provides much-needed relief from this density in a neighborhood where open space is in high demand. Portsmouth Square serves as an important community gathering space for Chinatown residents, providing open space for an array of cultural, recreational and social activities.

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<sup>1</sup> San Francisco Planning Department and San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department, *San Francisco Chinatown Portsmouth Square and Vicinity Existing Conditions Report*, p. 51, December 2014.



SOURCE: Esri, 2019; ESA, 2019

Portsmouth Square Improvement Project

**Figure 1**  
Project Location

## 750 Kearny Street and Pedestrian Bridge

As shown in Figure 2, Existing Site Plan, the pedestrian bridge that extends from Portsmouth Square over Kearny Street to the Hilton Hotel was built in 1971, concurrent with construction of the present-day Hilton Hotel building located at 750 Kearny Street (Assessor's Block 0208/Lot 024). The bridge, measuring 28 feet wide by 210 feet long, is a reinforced concrete structure that is supported by cross beams and two, two-column bents on each side of the street.<sup>2</sup> The bridge has a closed concrete railing with a smooth concrete cap lined with hexagonal metal lights. In the existing conditions report, the bridge was determined to be in generally good condition although further evaluation is needed to determine its seismic performance.<sup>3</sup>

### CURRENT HISTORIC STATUS

Planning Department staff has determined that Portsmouth Square is individually eligible for listing in the California Register of Historic Places under Criterion 1 (association with significant events) for its role as an important cultural space for the Chinatown community and for its association with important events and early development of San Francisco. As the city's earliest public square, the park was the site of the 1848 declaration of California independence, the proclamation of the discovery of gold in 1849, California's first public school, and the site of a refugee camp after the 1906 Earthquake. Portsmouth Square has also served as a public square and gathering space for San Franciscans since first being platted in 1833 and continues to serve the city up to present day. The park is particularly noteworthy as an important space that has served the Chinatown community for more than a century and continues to provide an open space for recreation, socializing, and cultural activities. Portsmouth Square is the site of annual events such as the Annual Chinatown Music Festival, Chinese New Year celebrations, along with parades, civic demonstrations, food drives, community meetings, and multiple regular performance arts events.

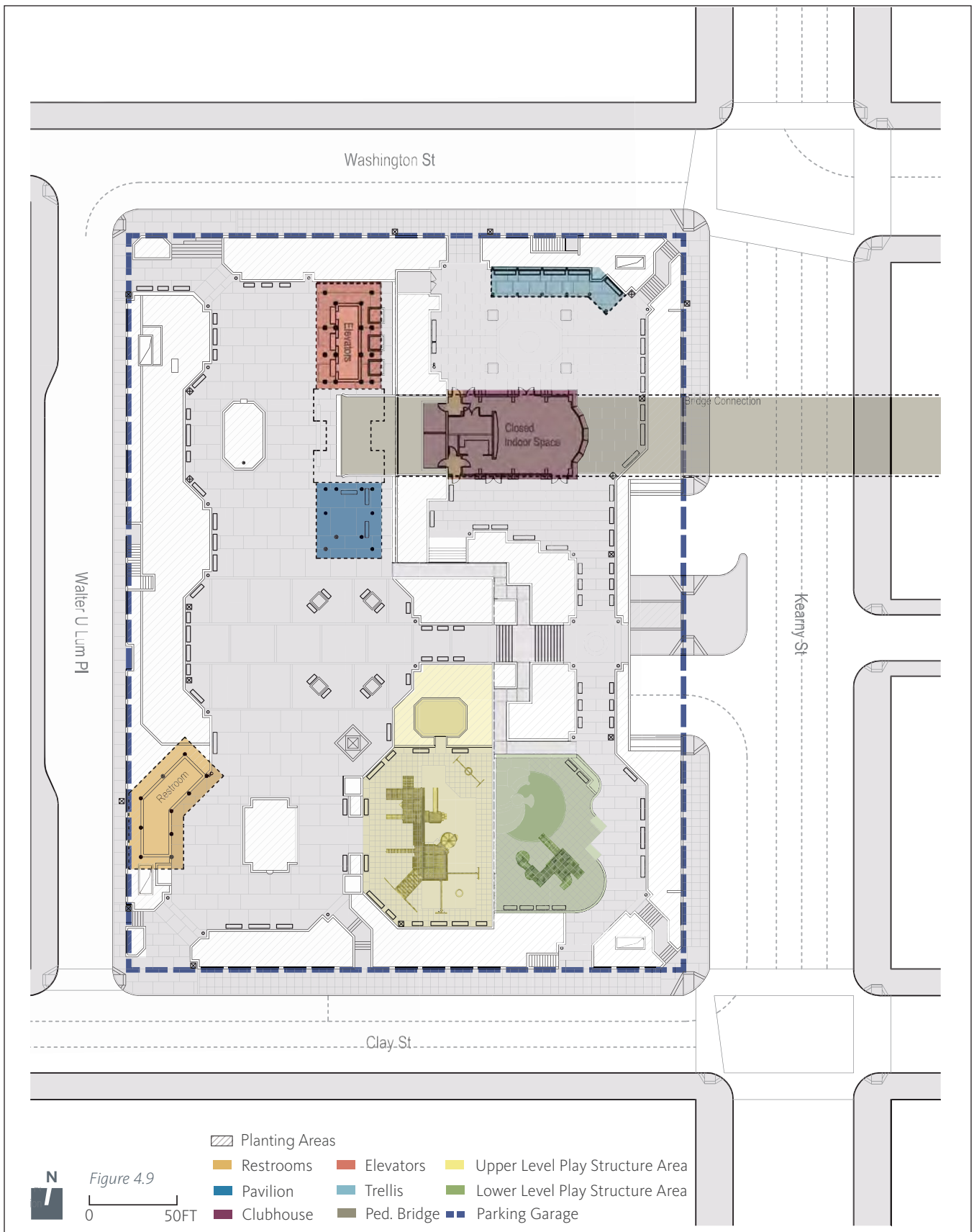
750 Kearny Street, site of the Hilton Hotel and associated pedestrian bridge, has been determined to be individually eligible for listing in the California Register of Historic Places under Criterion 1 (association with significant events) for its association with the growing political influence of San Francisco's Chinese community in the years after World War II. Members of the community successfully advocated for a community space and museum to be included when the property was developed. The Chinese Culture Center is located within a private hotel and is a testament to the dedicated efforts of Chinatown residents and Chinese Americans to establish a community-serving cultural space. Additionally, 750 Kearny Street is individually eligible for listing on the California Register under Criterion 3 (architectural significance) as an excellent example of the Brutalist style of architecture and designed by Master Architect Clement Chen. Brutalism is a subset of Late Modern architecture, and is known for exposed and expressive concrete structural systems; monumental massing and "heavy" appearance; the integration of bold, angular shapes and blockish, geometric forms; exposed concrete finishes; an overall lack of ornamentation; and articulated bases that rise above integral plazas and landscapes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A bent is structure that "bends" the weight of a bridge to the support pile. Together, bents support the entire bridge.

<sup>3</sup> San Francisco Planning Department and San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department, *San Francisco Chinatown Portsmouth Square and Vicinity Existing Conditions Report*, p. 51, December 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Architectural Resources Group, *Historic Resource Evaluation for the Hilton Hotel, San Francisco, California, Prepared for the San Francisco Planning Department*, March, 2019.



SOURCE: San Francisco Planning Department and San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department, 2014; amended by ESA in 2020

Portsmouth Square Improvement Project

**Figure 2**  
Existing Site Plan

## Zoning and General Plan Land Use Designations

The project site is located within the eastern portion of the Chinatown Area Plan and is within the “P-Public” zoning district and the “OS-Open Space” height and bulk district.

## Project Description

Except for the upper level restrooms and elevator facilities, all of the existing park features would be demolished, including the existing approximately 1,600-square-foot clubhouse, the approximately 4,000-square-foot plaza, the approximately 5,500 square feet of combined playground space, the approximately 1,600-square-foot shade structure, and all benches, walkways, and stairs. In addition, the pedestrian bridge spanning Kearny Street, as well as all planting areas and the 69 trees on the project site would be removed.

The proposed project would redesign and renovate nearly all of Portsmouth Square’s park features, waterproof the roof of the existing four-level underground parking garage, remove portions of the pedestrian bridge spanning Kearny Street, replace the clubhouse building, implement structural upgrades to the Portsmouth Square Garage, and replace landscaping.

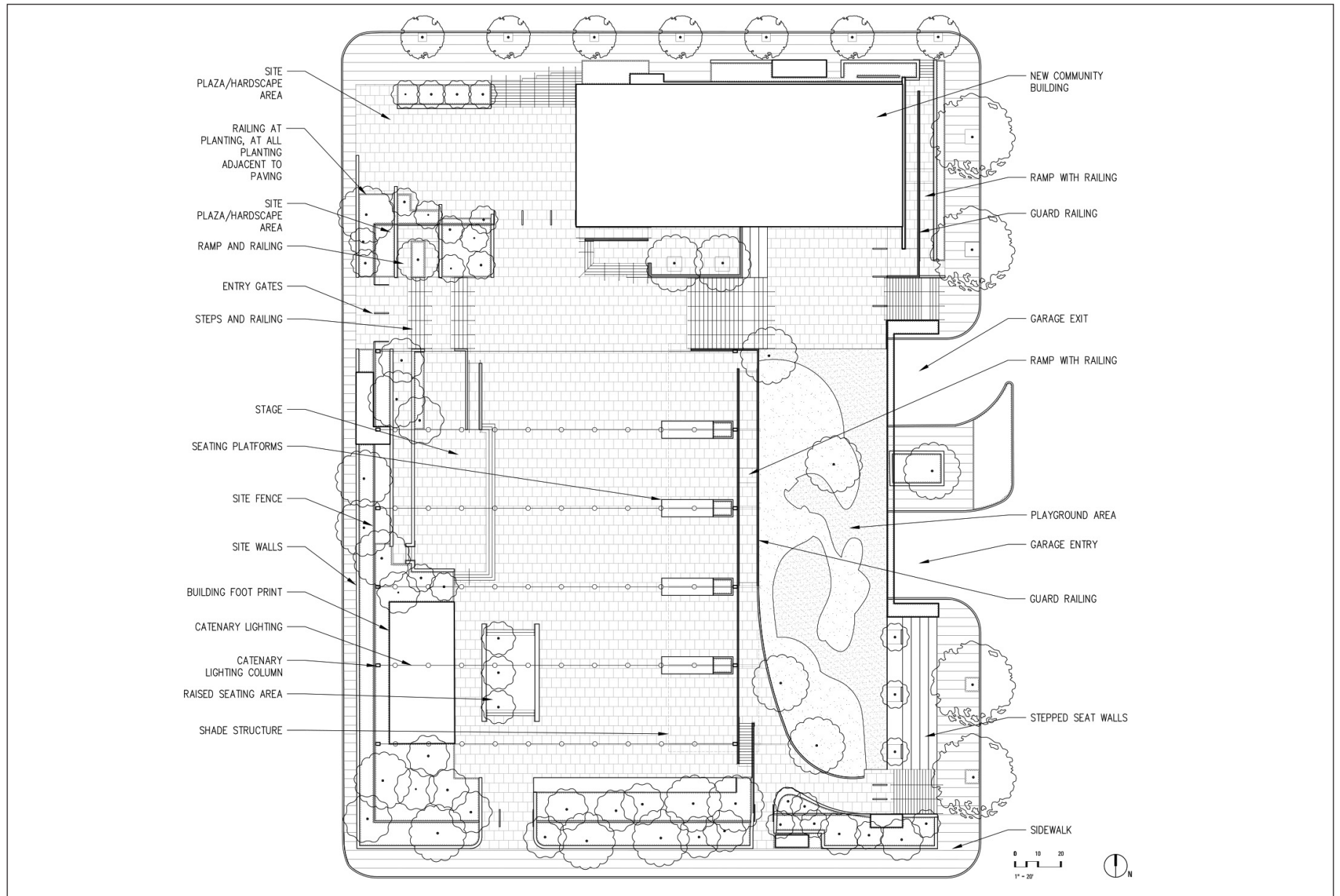
## Redesigned Park Summary

As shown in Figure 3, Proposed Site Plan, Figure 4, Proposed Illustrative Site Plan, Figure 5, Proposed Illustrative Rendering, and Table 1, the renovated park would feature the following primary components on a two-level redesigned park: a 7,500-square-foot clubhouse spanning both the lower and upper levels; a 8,500-square-foot plaza and event space on the upper level; a 1,200-square-foot elevated stage terrace on the upper level; a 3,500-square-foot shade structure on the upper level; a 6,500-square-foot playground and fitness area on the lower level, and new planting areas. The conceptual landscaping plan provides for contiguous perimeter raised planting areas. These planting areas would include large trees for shading, smaller ornamental trees, and perennials.

### UPPER LEVEL

The primary feature on the upper level of the redesigned park would be an enlarged event space, which would increase from the current approximately 4,500-square-foot space to about 8,000 square feet. This would include a 20-by-40-foot stage platform, as well as shade structures over a variety of seating types along the plaza edges (see Figure 5, Proposed Illustrative Rendering, and Figure 6, Proposed Cross-Section). The upper level would also include two entrance courts, one at the northwest corner of the park at the intersection of Walter U Lum Place and Washington Street, and one near the southwest corner of the park along Clay Street. The clubhouse, which would span both the upper and lower levels, would have a mezzanine area that would open to a porch on the upper level affording views of both the upper and lower terraces.

New landscaping would be provided along the south, west, and north corners of the upper level, and a grouping of trees would be planted near the existing restrooms. The existing upper level restrooms, elevators, staircase adjacent to the elevators, and elevator vents would remain.



SOURCE: SWA and MEI Joint Venture, 2018

Portsmouth Square Improvement Project

**Figure 3**  
Proposed Site Plan



SOURCE: SWA and MEI Joint Venture, 2018

Portsmouth Square Improvement Project

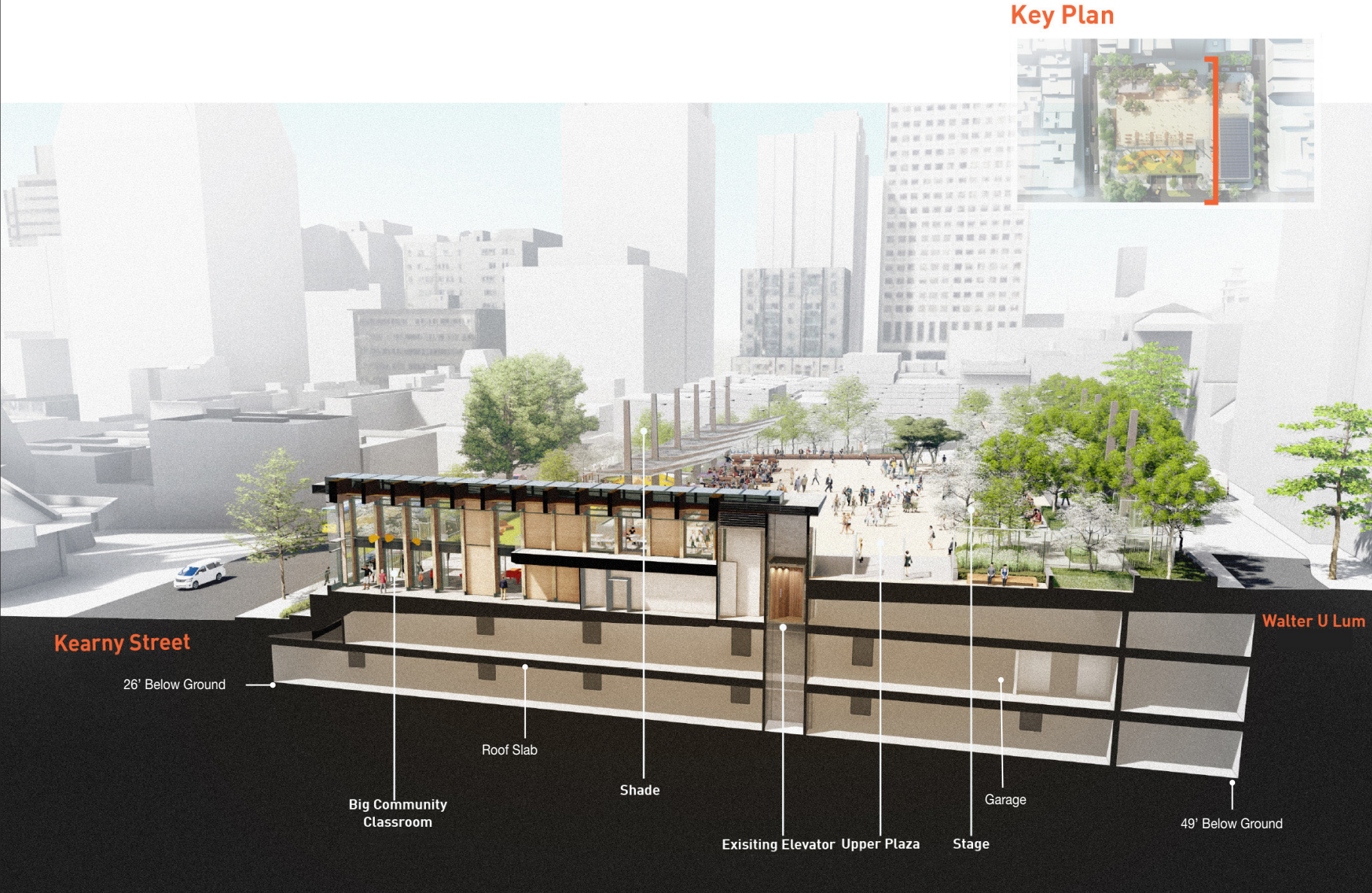
**Figure 4**  
Proposed Illustrative Site Plan



SOURCE: SWA and MEI Joint Venture, 2018

Portsmouth Square Improvement Project

**Figure 5**  
Proposed Illustrative Rendering



SOURCE: SWA and MEI Joint Venture, 2018

Portsmouth Square Improvement Project

**Figure 6**  
Proposed Cross-Section

**Table 1**

**Project Characteristics**

	EXISTING FACILITY	PROPOSED PROJECT
<b>PHYSICAL COMPONENTS</b>		
<b>Clubhouse</b>	1,600 sf (lower level)	7,500 sf (upper and lower level; 5,900 sf net change)
<b>Upper Level</b>	4,000 sf plaza and playground	8,500 sf plaza and event space with a 1,200 sf elevated stage terrace and a 3,500 sf shade structure (4,500 sf net change in plaza area)
<b>Playgrounds</b>	5,500 sf of combined playground space on the upper and lower levels	6,500 sf playground and fitness area would occupy the lower level only (1,000 sf net change)
<b>Hours of Operation</b>	5 a.m. – midnight	7 a.m. – 10 p.m.
<b>Fencing</b>	None	Fully fenced and gated with access to elevators available at all times
<b>Lighting</b>	Pole lighting	New energy-efficient LED lighting will be provided on light poles and catenary lighting on upper level. Light levels would be increased throughout park.
<b>Monuments</b>	<p>Five monuments and statues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Robert Louis Stevenson Monument (1897)</li> <li>Schoolhouse Monument (1957)</li> <li>Daughters of the American Revolution Plaque (1924)</li> <li>Portsmouth Square Plaque (1950)</li> <li>Goddess of Democracy Statue (1990)</li> <li>Andrew Smith Hallidie Plaque</li> </ul>	<p>All monuments and statues would remain on site as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Robert Louis Stevenson Monument to be relocated from the planting area near the Walter U Lum/Washington Street corner to the southwestern entrance to the park</li> <li>Schoolhouse Monument to be maintained in approximately the same location in front of the restroom</li> <li>Daughters of the American Revolution Plaque to be relocated from the northwest corner of the plaza to near the northeastern gate to the park</li> <li>Portsmouth Square Plaque to be relocated from the lower plaza in front of the existing Clubhouse to the Clubhouse entry on Washington Street</li> <li>Goddess of Democracy Statue to be relocated from the central to upper plaza to the northwestern corner entrance to the park</li> <li>Andrew Smith Hallidie Plaque to be retained at the site of the Eastern Terminus of San Francisco's first cable car (California Historical Landmark No. 500, dedicated 1968)</li> </ul>
<b>Pedestrian Bridge</b>	Pedestrian bridge spans Kearny Street providing access from Portsmouth Square to the Chinese Culture Center	Pedestrian bridge would be removed to improve park amenities, view corridors and user safety through additional natural light and ventilation to the park and sidewalk.
<b>Clubhouse</b>	1,600 sf (lower level)	7,500 sf (upper and lower level; 5,900 sf net change)

†Square feet = sf

Source: RPD, 2020

## LOWER LEVEL

The primary entrance to the clubhouse would be located on the lower level at the northeastern corner of the project site accessible from the intersection of Washington and Kearny streets (see Figure 5, Proposed Illustrative Rendering, and Figure 6, Proposed Cross-Section). The north, south, and east façades of the clubhouse would be glazed to provide visibility to the upper and lower terraces from within, as well as to the adjacent streets. The clubhouse would feature a large lower floor that would open to a clubhouse porch on the lower level.

An approximately 6,500-square-foot playground and fitness area, two entrances to the project site, and bleacher seating overlooking Kearny Street would be constructed near the southeast corner of the project site, adjacent to the intersection of Clay and Kearny streets. The fitness equipment near the playground would be designed for use by senior citizens.

## Pedestrian Bridge Removal

The majority of the pedestrian bridge spanning Kearny Street that connects Portsmouth Square with the third floor of the Hilton Hotel where the Chinese Culture Center is located would be removed. Removal of the majority of the bridge would improve view corridors and park safety by removing hidden corners and providing clear views from within the park; increase the amount of sunlight at the lower level of the park currently shaded at different times of the year by the bridge; and improve air circulation both at the park and at street level.

The pedestrian bridge on the Portsmouth Square side would be replaced with a park overlook adjacent to the proposed clubhouse that would terminate next to a staircase connecting the upper and lower levels (see Figure 5). Across Kearny Street, the portion of the bridge located on the Hilton Hotel property would be removed, while the existing bridge support columns would remain in place to support the second-floor outdoor terrace area in front of the Chinese Culture Center. The second-floor outdoor terrace area would continue to cover the ground-floor entrance to the Hilton Hotel, and would continue to allow access between the second and third floors of the Hilton Hotel. Two new structural beams would be installed to support the portion of the bridge cantilevered over the Hilton Hotel entry stairs, and these beams would not require excavation. The two beams would be attached to the existing structure.

## Portsmouth Square Plaza Garage Waterproofing

As shown in Figure 6, the Portsmouth Square Plaza Garage, which extends 26 to 49 feet beneath the park and below ground, includes an extensive roof drainage system since the lower level of the garage is below the water table. The condition of the garage was assessed in a structural conditions report in 2002.<sup>5</sup> The report concluded that seismic strengthening of the garage is not necessary, but that renovations should be made to the garage to improve drainage; therefore, the proposed project would include necessary waterproofing of the garage roof and elevator. Waterproofing the garage roof would entail removal of the existing roof covering during excavation of the project site, and installing a new waterproof membrane on top of the garage roof.

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<sup>5</sup> Degenkolb Engineers, Patri.Merker.Architects, HMC Engineers, Hesselberg Keesee & Associates, Inc., and Cahill Contractors, Inc. *Portsmouth Square Garage Structural Condition Appraisal and Renovation Study*, prepared for the City of San Francisco Portsmouth Plaza Parking Corporation, July 12, 2002 (revised September 20, 2002).

## Structural Upgrades

The Portsmouth Square Plaza Garage roof is composed of a series of sloped roof slabs that are not required to be seismically and/or structurally upgraded to support the new clubhouse and redesigned park. However, the project sponsor would implement voluntary structural changes to the garage consisting of the following:

- Installation of fiber reinforced panels along certain garage walls to seismically strengthen the garage;
- To support the new clubhouse, steel and concrete would be added above the existing roof to carry all clubhouse loads directly to the existing columns below the garage roof; and
- Where point loads from new structures (such as the trellis columns) are greater than the current loads, the existing structure will be strengthened at those locations.

The weight of all park improvements would be coordinated so that they do not increase the overall weight on the existing garage.

## Project Construction

Construction of the proposed project is anticipated to occur over a 24-month period and is anticipated to begin in the summer of 2023. During construction, the park would be closed to the public. Construction would consist of the following activities, some of which would overlap:

- Stage/mobilize equipment and crew (two months);
- Demolition of the pedestrian bridge (six months);
- Site demolition, including all recreational features and landscaping (four months). During this phase, the five monuments would be temporarily stored in an off- or on-site dry and secured area;
- Construct infrastructure (eight months);
- Construct the site, including all recreational features (eight months);
- Construct the new clubhouse (12 months);
- Remove equipment from site and re-open park (one month).

Demolition and reconstruction of the site would require soil excavation/disturbance of up to 24 inches in localized areas of the park to remove all existing vegetation and planting beds (see Figure 2).<sup>6</sup> Approximately 412 cubic yards (11,124 square feet) of soil would be disturbed. The project sponsor is assessing the amount of soil that can be reused onsite to the greatest extent possible.

Installation of the structural concrete beams that would support the portion of the bridge cantilevered over the Hilton Hotel entry stairs would not require excavation. The two new beams would be bolted to the existing structure. The two existing rectangular concrete columns that support the east end of the bridge and extend through the underground floors of the hotel parking garage to the mat foundation below would remain. The two center support columns adjacent to the curb at the west side of Kearny Street and the two columns at the west end of the bridge that extend through the underground levels of the parking garage would be removed.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that this does not include excavation below the ground surface; just the removal of existing soil that is located on top of the existing garage structure.

Demolition of the two center support columns would require excavation up to four feet below ground. This would occur adjacent to the Portsmouth Square Parking Garage walls. Demolition of the west end columns would require excavation up to 24 inches before reaching the roof of the parking garage below. The west end columns would be removed from all levels of the parking garage, as such approximately two parking spaces per floor would be inaccessible during bridge demolition.

## Required project approvals

### San Francisco Planning Commission

- Adoption of findings of consistency with the San Francisco General Plan and priority policies of Planning Code section 101.1.
- Certification of the Environmental Impact Report and adoption of findings under CEQA.
- Adoption of findings under CEQA.

### San Francisco Recreation and Parks Commission

- Approval of the Portsmouth Square Improvement Project Conceptual Plan.
- Approval of award of construction contract.

### San Francisco Department of Public Works

- Actions and approvals related to its jurisdictional authority, including permits for use of public rights of way during construction, final street space permits, and revocation of encroachment permit for pedestrian bridge over public right of way.

### San Francisco Department of Building Inspection

- Review and approval of demolition, grading, and building permits.
- If any night construction work is proposed that would result in noise greater than five dBA above ambient noise levels, approval of a permit for nighttime construction is required.

### San Francisco Public Utilities Commission

- Actions and approvals related to its jurisdictional authority, including connections to the City sewer system, an Erosion and Sediment Control Plan and post-construction stormwater design guidelines and stormwater control plan.

### San Francisco Public Health Department

- Approval of a Dust Control Plan as required pursuant to Article 22B of the San Francisco Health Code.

## Summary of Potential Environmental Issues

The proposed project could result in potentially significant environmental effects. As such, the San Francisco Planning Department will prepare an initial study and an EIR to evaluate the physical environmental effects of the proposed project. As required by CEQA, the EIR will further examine those issues identified in the initial study to have potentially significant effects, identify mitigation measures, and analyze whether the proposed mitigation measures would reduce the environmental effects to less-than-significant levels. The initial study will be published as an appendix to the draft EIR and will be considered part of the EIR.

The EIR and initial study will be prepared in compliance with CEQA (California Public Resources Code, sections 21000 et seq.), the CEQA Guidelines, and Chapter 31 of the San Francisco Administrative Code, and will address project-specific construction and operational impacts. The EIR and initial study are informational documents for use by governmental agencies and the public to aid in the planning and decision-making process. The EIR and initial study will disclose any physical environmental effects of the proposed project and identify possible ways of reducing or avoiding their potentially significant impacts.

The EIR and initial study will evaluate the environmental impacts of the proposed project resulting from construction and operation of the proposed project, and will propose mitigation measures for impacts determined to be significant. The EIR and initial study will also identify potential cumulative impacts that consider impacts of the proposed project in combination with impacts of other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects. The EIR and initial study will address all topics in the San Francisco Planning Department's CEQA environmental checklist, including the following environmental topics:

- Land Use and Planning
- Aesthetics
- Population and Housing
- Cultural Resources
- Tribal Cultural Resources
- Transportation and Circulation
- Noise
- Air Quality
- Greenhouse Gas Emissions
- Wind
- Shadow
- Recreation
- Utilities and Service Systems
- Public Services
- Biological Resources
- Geology and Soils
- Hydrology and Water Quality
- Hazards and Hazardous Materials
- Mineral Resources
- Energy
- Agriculture and Forestry Resources
- Wildfire

In addition, the EIR will include an analysis of the comparative environmental impacts of feasible alternatives to the proposed project that would reduce or avoid one or more of the significant impacts of the project while still meeting most of the project objectives. Alternatives to be considered include a no project alternative, which considers reasonably foreseeable conditions at the project site if the proposed project is not implemented, as well as partial and full historic preservation alternatives, which consider alternative project scenarios that would partially and/or fully preserve the historic resource that would be demolished under the proposed project. Other alternatives will be evaluated as necessary, depending on the results of the impact analyses of the various environmental topics listed above. The EIR will also include a discussion of topics required by CEQA, including the project's growth-inducing impacts, significant unavoidable impacts, significant irreversible impacts, any known controversy associated with the project and its environmental effects, and issues to be resolved by decision-makers.

## Finding

This project may have a significant effect on the environment and an EIR is required. This finding is based upon the criteria of the CEQA Guidelines, sections 15064 (Determining Significant Effect) and 15065 (Mandatory

Findings of Significance). The purpose of the EIR is to provide information about potential significant physical environmental effects of the proposed project, to identify possible ways to minimize the significant effects, and to describe and analyze possible alternatives to the proposed project. Preparation of an NOP or EIR does not indicate a decision by the City to approve or disapprove the project. However, prior to making any such decision, the decision makers must review and consider the information contained in the EIR.

## Public Scoping Comments

Written comments pertaining to this NOP should be sent or emailed to Rachel Schuett, San Francisco Planning Department, 49 South Van Ness Avenue, Suite 1400, San Francisco, CA 94103, or [rachel.schuett@sfgov.org](mailto:rachel.schuett@sfgov.org) and should reference the project title and case number on the front of this notice.

**State Agencies:** If you work for an agency that is a Responsible or a Trustee Agency, we need to know the views of your agency regarding the scope and content of the environmental information that is germane to your agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the proposed project. Your agency may need to use the EIR when considering a permit or other approval for this project. Please include the name of a contact person in your agency. If you have questions concerning environmental review of the proposed project, please contact Rachel Schuett at 628.652.7546 or [rachel.schuett@sfgov.org](mailto:rachel.schuett@sfgov.org).

Members of the public are not required to provide personal identifying information when they communicate with the Commission or the Department. All written or oral communications, including submitted personal contact information, may be made available to the public for inspection and copying upon request and may appear on the Department's website or in other public documents.

September 23, 2020

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Date



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Lisa Gibson

Environmental Review Officer