

Embarcadero in SF on list of nation's at-risk historic treasures

John King, San Francisco Chronicle, 10-5-16

San Francisco's Embarcadero has been named one of America's at-risk historic treasures — not because of development threats, but the looming dangers posed by earthquakes and sea-level rise.

The combination of the 3-mile seawall that forms the downtown shoreline and the piers along it that extend into the bay are on the list of the nation's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places released Wednesday by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Embarcadero is only the second San Francisco spot to appear on the national list, now in its 29th year.

“We wanted to call attention to the fact that thousands of historic resources along our shorelines and our rivers are at risk from sea-level rise,” said Stephanie Meeks, president of the National Trust. “So much has been invested in the Embarcadero, and so much is top-notch preservation.”

The Old Mint made the list last year, a gesture intended partly to shame City Hall into taking care of the 142-year-old landmark. But this year's spotlight is welcomed by officials at the Port of San Francisco, which owns and maintains the seawall and piers.

“I'd say this is more good than bad — it's a call to action,” said Elaine Forbes, the port's interim director. “We're facing real threats.”

Those threats have been spelled out along with other pressures sea-level rise presents to the Bay Area in The Chronicle's ongoing Rising Reality series. They also were the subject of an engineering study done for the port that warned of “greater than expected risk to the seawall” if a sizable earthquake strikes on the Hayward or San Andreas faults. Extreme shaking wouldn't cause the century-old barrier of concrete and rocks to collapse, but the partially submerged structure could lurch down and out toward the bay, tearing apart portions of the roadway and structures above.

Add the challenge of preparing for sea-level rise — the city now bases its planning on a 2012 study by the National Research Council that estimates tides in 2100 climbing as much as 66 inches higher than they are today — and “costs could reach \$5 billion to fully incorporate adaptation measures needed for the next 100 years.”

Given these scenarios, the city has budgeted \$8 million during the next two years for a full assessment of the seawall's strength or lack thereof, along with initial work on planning and environmental studies of a response

“We'll want to address the most vulnerable areas first,” Forbes said. “We also want to engage in a planning process that gets us out of the box a bit” in terms of thinking about how to improve the seawall. If it simply is raised in height, the historic piers would be cut off from the Embarcadero and the inland city.

In its annual listing, the National Trust calls the Embarcadero Historic District “a major economic engine for the Bay Area” that “has contributed to a remarkable urban waterfront renaissance.” That renaissance began in 1991 with the removal of the double-deck Embarcadero Freeway between Folsom Street and Broadway. Since then there have been popular restorations of the Ferry Building and Piers 11/2, 3 and 5, as well as waterside plazas and a new cruise terminal at Pier 27.

“We don't want to lose the Embarcadero's essence in the act of protecting ourselves,” said Anthony Veerkamp, the field director of the National Trust's San Francisco office. He speculated that the district received national

attention because, “the seismic threat to the seawall adds an urgency that we don’t see from sea-level rise alone.”

The 11 Most Endangered list is culled from more than 100 nominations each year. Other places in the class of 2016 include a historic naval hospital facing demolition threats in Charleston, S.C.; two heavily Latino neighborhoods in El Paso, Texas, that are under pressure from gentrification; and the 1.9 million-acre Bears Ears landscape in southeast Utah “threatened by looting, mismanaged recreational use, and energy development.”