

# City Hall: Connie Chan

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## Fighting Pay-to-Pay in Golden Gate Park

By Connie Chan

Golden Gate Park has a long history, celebrating its 152nd anniversary this year. It's the third-most visited city park in the country and was built when Superintendent John McLaren had the vision at a time when San Franciscans were in desperate need of a green oasis.

McLaren preferred trees over statues and fought to protect plants and wildlife habitats against artificial structures, like state fairs and Ferris wheels. He loved Golden Gate Park so much that he literally lived in the Park. His residence was located at the east entrance of the Park, today known as the McLaren Lodge.

For years, I had the privilege of sitting and working in a corner in the attic of McLaren's former residence as a Recreation and Park Department staff member. I treasured daily moments of walking through the Oakwood Trail when commuting to and from work. Over the years, I have learned that I have almost nothing in common with John McLaren, except that I share his vision for Golden Gate Park: it must remain a green oasis for all San Franciscans.

However, many things have changed since the days of John McLaren as our leader of the City's green open space. According to a 2021 national report from the Trust for Public Land, San Francisco is #1 in the nation for spending on parks per capita, but not even in the top 10 for equity in those parks. Access for ALL of our residents to parks and open space is crucial, especially as we approach the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, even during the pandemic, on the east end of Golden Gate Park, there

are admission fees required at institutions including the Conservatory of Flowers, Botanical Garden, Japanese Tea Garden, de Young Museum, California Academy of Sciences and its latest additions: the Ferris wheel and a \$26 million, newly renovated Goldman Tennis Center with reservation-only use. On the west end of the Park, there is the Beach Chalet Soccer Field, which often requires a permit for use. Then, there are food trucks and vendors popping up in every corner of the Park, becoming easier to find than a restroom. Everywhere you go in Golden Gate Park – if you can even get there during the pandemic, when public transit service is reduced and some roads are closed – you will find increasingly limited access to the free green oasis that John McLaren envisioned for all of us.

In 2021, the Recreation and Park Department proposed a lease agreement with the Botanical Garden Society to manage the Japanese Tea Garden and Conservatory of Flowers along with the Botanical Garden and an increase of all non-resident admission fees by 50%. This proposal also highlighted that the Conservatory of Flowers, previously managed by the San Francisco Parks Alliance, was suffering a deficit of more than \$1 million. Upon learning of this proposal, I demanded that the Recreation and Park Commissioners amend the agreement to include free admission for all San Francisco residents. I objected to the use of city funds to cover the Parks Alliance's deficit due to their mismanagement and I challenged the methodology of the Department's so-called flexible pricing for non-resident fees.

I am pleased to see that Mayor London Breed announced a proposal that is mostly in agreement with my demands, but I will continue to hold Rec. and Park accountable to ensure these institutions remain affordable and accessible.

The mayor's proposal still has a flexible pricing system for non-San Francisco residents which allows the general manager to arbitrarily increase admission prices up to 50% without additional oversight, approvals or limitations. The possibility that admissions for these three attractions could

increase drastically – with no cap on the increased fees – is alarming. A large percentage of out-of-town visitors are actually local, most likely friends and family from the greater Bay Area, and sticking them with the bill is no way to manage our green open spaces. This policy means a family of three could go from paying less than \$20 to visit these gardens to almost \$40.

We need to ensure our public parks are affordable and accessible to everyone, and Golden Gate Park is no exception. I believe we have the tools to strike the right balance between free and open access and reasonable fees to fund operations without restricting access to an exclusive few. Working together in a transparent and public process to find this balance is how we best uphold John McLaren's vision of keeping Golden Gate Park a serene refuge for all.

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