Dear President Chiu,

Last month, Adam Gottstein, the grandson of original Coit Tower muralist Bernard Zakheim, wrote to you and other city officials expressing his deep concern at the discovery that the city allowed a private candlelight dinner party to be held last year right next to the fragile and historic frescoes inside Coit Tower. Now, newly obtained documents reveal that the city shut down Coit Tower to the public during the day in order to hold this private dinner party for real estate investor Thomas J. Coates, his wife, and 10 of their friends, in apparent violation of the terms of the city’s own existing lease at Coit Tower. As the Supervisor for the District that includes Coit Tower, I ask that you initiate an investigation and hold a public hearing to determine what has been happening at Coit Tower.

City emails and records reveal that the April 12, 2011 private dinner party held next to the Coit Tower murals appears to have violated the terms of the city’s lease at Coit Tower in two ways.

First, emails from San Francisco officials indicate that the city closed Coit Tower off to the general public two hours early – at 4pm rather than at the 6pm regular closing time – on April 12, 2011 in order to hold a dinner party in the Coit Tower mural room. Evicting the public from Coit Tower during regular business hours for a 12 person private dinner party clashes with the entire purpose of Coit Tower as a public place for all to enjoy. Moreover, closing Coit Tower off to the public during the day for a private party appears to violate the existing lease between the City of San Francisco and the current Coit Tower concessionaire, which on page 1 states that: “All special events must be held in the evening only.” Closing Coit Tower at 4:00 pm in the afternoon therefore not only prevented residents and visitors from being able to enjoy Coit Tower and its historic murals, but appears to have violated the city’s own lease by shutting down Coit Tower during the day for a private party.

Second, public records and photographs show that a long list of food and beverages were served on a candlelight table placed immediately adjacent to the historic Coit Tower murals. However, as noted on page 14 of the city’s current lease with the Coit Tower concessionaire: “The murals in the main lobby and the stairway to the second floor constitute the most important asset of the building and as such required imposition of adequate safeguard in the development of plans for commercial use of these sensitive parts of the building . . . cigarette smoke, food and beverages all pose a serious hazard to the murals.” Therefore, when the city allowed candles to be lit and food and beverages to be served on a table placed right next to several of the Coit Tower murals, it allowed a “serious hazard to the murals” to occur in apparent violation of the lease.
While this Coit Tower mural room dinner party took place a year ago, this is an especially urgent and relevant matter now. As you know, the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department is currently in the process of granting a contract to a new Coit Tower concession company that the terms of the Request for Proposals state would significantly increase the number of private parties held at Coit Tower by requiring the new concessionaire to “book one event per month at Coit Tower.” If the city has already been violating its own policy at Coit Tower by closing it down to the public during the day for private parties and allowing “serious hazards to the murals,” that raises troubling questions about the prospect of a dramatic increase in the number of private parties held inside Coit Tower. The people of San Francisco who deeply value Coit Tower deserve to know the answers.

Therefore, I respectfully request that you initiate an investigation into this matter and hold a public hearing to determine what has been happening at Coit Tower.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Jon Golinger
Chair, Protect Coit Tower Committee

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cc: Mark Buell, Chair, San Francisco Recreation and Park Commission
    J.D. Beltran, Chair, San Francisco Arts Commission
    City Attorney Dennis Herrera