



Save Our Heritage Organisation

Protecting San Diego's architectural and cultural heritage since 1969

On behalf of the undersigned former members and staff of the San Diego Historical Resources Board, Save Our Heritage Organisation (SOHO) forwards this letter for your review.

January 7, 2026

Mayor Todd Gloria
San Diego City Council
202 C Street
San Diego CA 92101

RE: Letter from Former HRB Members and Staff Regarding the City's Historic Preservation Program

Dear Mayor Gloria and members of the City Council,

We, the undersigned former staff leaders and board members of San Diego's Historical Resources Board, had the privilege of serving during a period when the City's preservation program was defined by its effectiveness, fairness, and spirit of collaboration.

During our decades of service, we worked closely with the preservation community toward a shared goal—to identify, protect, and celebrate San Diego's historic resources. Staff and board members alike valued public participation, open communication, and mutual respect. These principles fostered confidence in the process and ensured that decisions were grounded in transparency and sound preservation practice.

Today, many within the preservation community have voiced concerns about the diminishing communication and collaboration between HRB staff and the public. The Historical Resources Program, now managed within the Development Services Department, faces structural challenges that limit its independence and weaken its preservation mission. While this arrangement is not new, it has again proven detrimental at a time when the department's focus appears to prioritize new construction at the expense of community character and environmental stewardship.

We are also deeply disappointed that the Design Assistance Subcommittee has been relegated to an advisory-only role and that the full board is seldom asked to provide input on the appropriateness of rehabilitation projects under the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. This loss of meaningful review has eroded one of the program's most effective mechanisms for ensuring quality and consistency in preservation outcomes.

In recent years, mayoral administrations have further undermined the board's effectiveness through political manipulation of its composition—delaying appointments, leaving seats unfilled, and causing quorum issues that have resulted in failed designations and cancelled meetings. While we commend the recent progress in restoring full board membership and appreciate the renewed commitment of members to attend meetings in their entirety, we urge the City to maintain this standard as a matter of accountability and respect for public service.

We also acknowledge and applaud the recent strengthening of preservation planning staff. However, even at current levels, staffing remains comparable to what cities such as Cincinnati reached more than 25 years ago—still well below what is needed for a city of San Diego’s size and complexity. Many of us remember when the program operated with a single staff member assigned three-quarters time; while progress has been made since then, it is not enough. We strongly recommend that the City increase preservation planning staff by at least three additional positions to restore a sustainable workload and the program’s effectiveness.

Furthermore, we have observed that staff have fallen significantly behind in bringing nominations forward to the board. It’s not uncommon for delays of one year or more. This is especially true with respect to historic district nominations where a significant backlog has been growing since 2013. When local district designations stopped in 2017, frustrated property owners turned to the National Register for speedier processing. Since 2021, six historic districts have achieved National Register distinction; yet certain HRB members disparaged such grassroots efforts as less worthy than more cumbersome, lengthy, and expensive local review. With fewer staff members in the past, the board regularly reviewed three times the number of potential resources now being processed. The growing length and complexity of historic designation reports—which have expanded from 40–60 pages to over 120–160 pages per resource—have also created unnecessary costs without enhancing report effectiveness. These administrative barriers have driven up costs and ultimately discouraged property owners, researchers, and the general public in the local preservation process.

While we recognize that structures, staffing, and procedures evolve, we believe the City’s most successful preservation outcomes have always stemmed from cooperation, expertise, and open dialogue among staff, board members, and the community. By recalling these productive partnerships—built on trust, access, and shared purpose—we urge a renewed commitment to these values and to the long-term vitality of San Diego’s historic preservation program.

Respectfully submitted,
Former staff and members of the San Diego Historical Resources Board

Ron Buckley – Retired Senior Planner, City of San Diego
Diane Kane, Ph.D., AICP – Retired Senior Planner, HRB
Angeles Leira – Retired Senior Planner, HRB
Ginger Weatherford, MPS – Architectural Historian

Priscilla Berge – Former Board Member, HRB
Andrew Bowen – Former Board Member, HRB
Laura Burnett, FASLA – Former Board Member, HRB
Courtney Ann Coyle – Former Chair, HRB
Maria Curry – Former Board Member, HRB
Milford Wayne Donaldson, FAIA – Former Board Member, HRB; past State Historic Preservation Officer
John Eisenhardt – Former Board Member, HRB
Gail Garbini – Former Board Member, HRB
Ann Jarmusch – Former Board Member, HRB
David Marshall, AIA – Former Board Member, HRB
Todd Pitman – Former Board Member, HRB
Ione R. Stiegler, FAIA – Former Board Member, HRB; Founding Member, Design Assistance Subcommittee
Ann Woods, Ph.D. – Former Board Member, HRB