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Yerba Buena Center Statement [Moscone Center]

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I am proud to be standing here with all of you this morning, because we are about to witness one of the most important events in the history of this City.

I do not use these words lightly, ladies and gentlemen, because the groundbreaking for Yerba Buena Center represents more than just a shot in the arm for our most important local industry. It represents more than the rejuvenation of the South of Market district in our City, and the generation of up to 3000 new jobs.

The groundbreaking for Yerba Buena Center represents the vindication of the democratic process in San Francisco. And the fact that we have finally arrived at this momentous day is a tribute to the people of our great City.

I need not remind any of you that, for years, the construction of a convention center in Yerba Buena has been viewed as a crucial project for our community. We have heard repeatedly how this project would stimulate healthy economic growth in San Francisco.

But for over 16 years, this important project was stalled by lawsuits, charges of bad faith, and the general belief that Yerba Buena was just a gleam in some planner's eye---a reality that would never come to pass.

That was the status of Yerba Buena when I assumed the office of Mayor in January, 1976. Yet today, two years and eight months later, we are about to begin constructing this important center.

I must tell you in all candor that this groundbreaking today represents one of the greatest---if not the greatest--achievement of this administration to date.

It was not easy putting the pieces of this project together. But it was a challenge which this City had to meet head-on, and I made it one of my top priorities as Mayor.

As a candidate for this office, I said repeatedly that the reason Yerba Buena continued to look like post-war Dresden was because the people...
of our City had been shut out of the planning process for this facility. I said that had to change, and fast.

Therefore, one of my first acts as Mayor was to appoint a broad-based citizen's advisory committee on Yerba Buena. I told them to hold public hearings in the neighborhoods of this City, and to find out what the people wanted to do with this valuable downtown land.

This was not your ordinary factfinding committee, however.

It was a committee composed of the very factions which had been warring over the development of Yerba Buena for years. I knew that we would never move forward on this project without a consensus among these groups. That's why I asked the representatives of labor, neighborhoods, environmentalists, and the downtown community to sit down at the same table, and hammer out a blueprint for the future---a future with which all of them could live.

Above all, I asked them to go out into the neighborhoods of this community, and to listen to the people of San Francisco.

Under the able direction of Judge Leland Lazarus, this hardworking committee burned the midnight oil on numerous occasions. They listened closely to our citizens and, after many public hearings, the Committee arrived at a consensus plan for Yerba Buena.

They determined that a convention center should be built, and that if financially feasible it should be built underground.

This was a major step forward for Yerba Buena. But it was just the beginning.

As I campaigned for the office of Mayor, I heard the people of our City say over and over again, that, somehow, the citizens who benefitted most from a convention center should pay the costs of constructing such a facility. They told me we should not burden the homeowners and renters of San Francisco with the costs of Yerba Buena.

I heard them loud and clear. In conjunction with our advisory committee,
we resolved that the costs of constructing YBC should be paid for with an increased hotel tax. We would not charge the property taxpayers of this City one thin dime.

Needless to say, we were pleased that the leaders of the downtown tourist industry supported this plan. It was just one more indication that a good-faith effort to develop YBC would receive the cooperation of all segments of our City.

That was yet another step forward for Yerba Buena, but we still had a long way to go.

For years, this proposal had been wracked with controversy. For years, City Hall was besieged with advocates and critics of the project, all claiming to speak on behalf of the people of this City.

The time had come to let the people of San Francisco speak once and for all on the matter of Yerba Buena. It was time to put a halt to the rhetoric and speeches—and to let the voters of this City determine the future of this project.

So I took the recommendations of our citizen's committee on Yerba Buena and, with the support of 10 Supervisors, we placed a policy statement embracing these suggestions on the November, 1976, ballot.

It is now history that the people of San Francisco voted overwhelmingly by a 58% margin to approve these recommendations for an underground convention center. The road was clear to begin planning and constructing this crucial project.

I don't think it's too far-fetched to say that within the last two years, the Yerba Buena issue has given this City a textbook example of the democratic process in action.

We heard political discontent about YBC, and we responded to it by throwing open the doors of government as they had never been thrown open before. We heard concerns over the costs of the project, and devised a financing plan which made sense to the taxpayers of this City.
We heard confusing claims about what the people of this City really wanted. And so we made the ultimate test, by submitting the YBC issue to the voters of San Francisco.

Their ringing approval was perhaps the greatest victory of all in the long saga of Yerba Buena Center.

However, we didn't get to this groundbreaking today on the strength of an election victory alone.

I am proud that I appointed a Chief Administrative Officer, Roger Boas, who so ably took control of the construction management of Yerba Buena. He has steered this project through its many reporting requirements, financial deadlines, and has played a major role in making this groundbreaking possible.

I am also proud that I have been able to work closely with the President of the Board of Supervisors and her colleagues in bringing the YBC project so far down the road. They deserve the thanks of all San Franciscans for their efforts as well.

I am pleased that we have received such constructive cooperation from the leaders of the tourist and convention industries in San Francisco, and I know we can continue to count on their cooperation in the future.

But most of all, we must thank the people of our City for their role in the development of YBC. For in the final analysis, it was their decision which made all of this possible.

Today, we'll hear a great deal about the financial benefits which will flow from the construction of Yerba Buena. We'll hear about a facility destined to be the largest column-free exhibit hall in the world.

We'll hear about the new conventions coming to San Francisco because of YBC, and the additional $26-50 million they will generate for this City every year. We'll hear about the 3000 new jobs created by YBC as well.

But if we hear nothing else today, let us never forget that Yerba Buena has provided a valuable civics lesson for this City—and for all other cities as well.
Where once there was bitter debate, endless litigation, and a blight in the heart of our City, there is now a sense of civic unity, a greater cooperation among the many groups affected by YBC, and the promise of a convention facility that will be the envy of this nation.

Ultimately Yerba Buena is more than a monument to economic growth. For it has shown us that the democratic process is alive and well in San Francisco.

That's why this groundbreaking is such an important event in the history of our City.

Thank you very much.

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