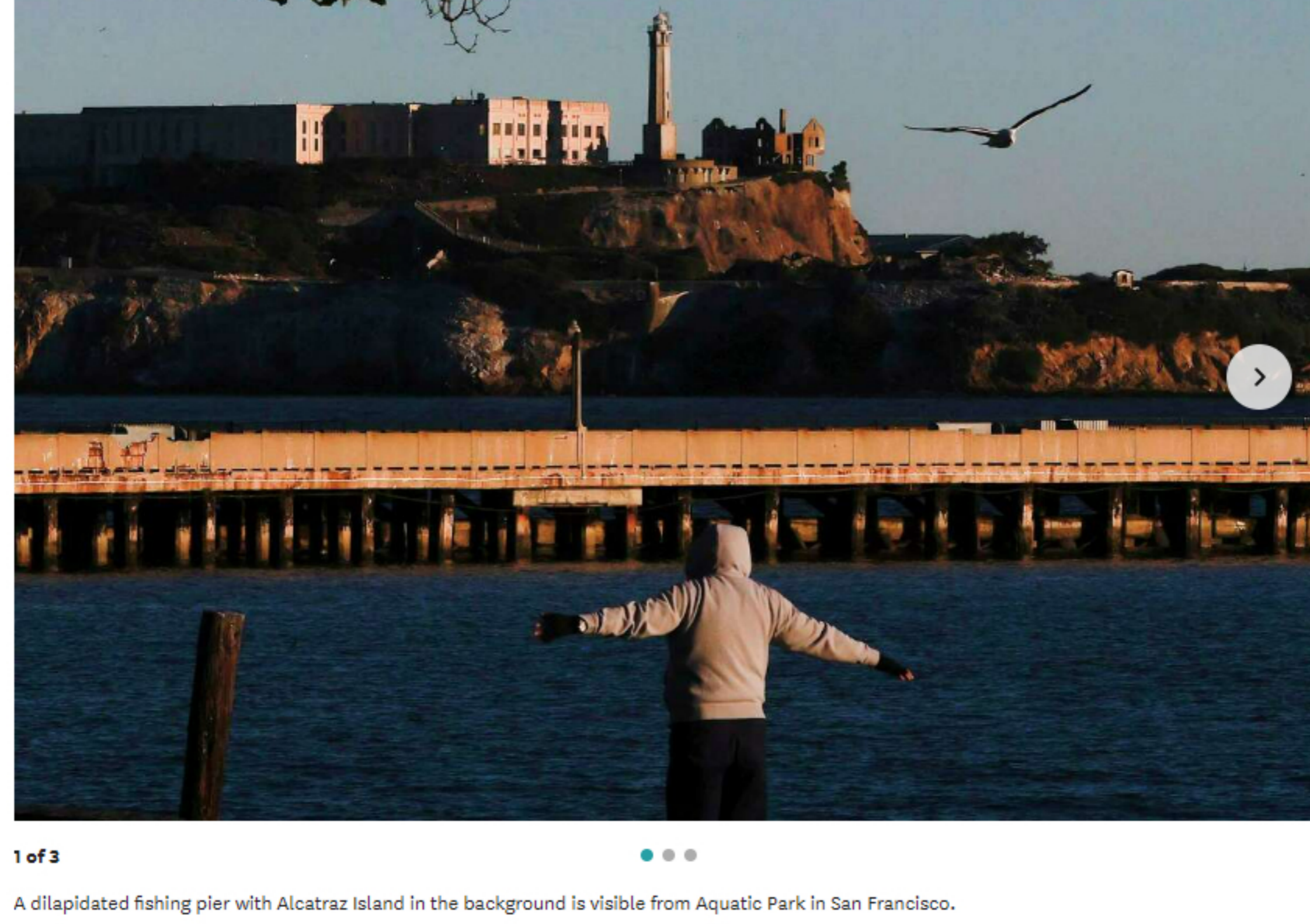


This S.F. park has scenic views of Alcatraz and Mt. Tamalpais. Now it's in dire need of an overhaul

John King, Urban Design

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A dilapidated fishing pier with Alcatraz Island in the background is visible from Aquatic Park in San Francisco. Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

Gravity is a powerful force in large cities, and not just the physical kind. As social and cultural patterns shift, places that were destinations in one era can seem remote in the next.

However touchy-feely this might sound, it's a big reason one of San Francisco's most distinctive parks is in dire need of an overhaul: Aquatic Park, which cradles a cove between Fisherman's Wharf and Fort Mason, downhill from Ghirardelli Square and Russian Hill. The setting can't be beat, but it's in a part of the city that, for many, people is off the map.

In this case, being out of the way has hastened the decline of an expansive public oasis spot that dates back to the 1930s, a decline underscored in November by the closure of its enormous pier that curves 1,400 feet into the bay. The question now is whether the closing can prove to be a blessing in disguise — providing a nudge to rebuild the pier and start giving Aquatic Park the tender loving care that is long overdue.

"Maybe everyone needed this wake-up call," said Catherine Stefani, who has been advocating for upgrades since she was elected to the Board of Supervisors in 2018. "The pier absolutely has to be rebuilt."

The best way to appreciate Aquatic Park and its potential is easy: Lounge on the concrete bleachers above the beach, and take in the scene.



A man walks up a sloped grassy knoll at Aquatic Park in San Francisco. Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

Straight ahead are the Marin Headlands and Mount Tamalpais, scenographic backdrops to the determined swimmers closer to shore. Craggy Black Point rises to your left, a rare remnant of San Francisco's natural shoreline. On the right, Alcatraz looks like it's just yards behind the three-masted Balclutha, an immense steel-hulled sailing ship from 1886 docked at Hyde Street Pier.

Or walk the beach past the former bathhouse that now holds the Maritime Museum, a buoyant example of Streamline Moderne architecture. Sand gives way to stepped cobblestones, and as you approach Municipal Pier, which predates the rest of the park, a look back inland reveals Coit Tower and the Transamerica Pyramid starting to pop into view.

The compressed visual drama makes the pleasant park, with its green slope down from Beach Street, all the more memorable. It's the stuff of which postcards are made.

But except for events such as the Fourth of July fireworks, there's rarely the energy found in spots like the Dolores Park in the Mission, or along the Embarcadero. Unless they live on a nearby hill, or are among the hardy members of the Dolphin Club, many San Franciscans have written off this part of the city as a place for tourists, not locals.

When you reach the pier, though, it becomes apparent that places frozen in time, off the radar, are vulnerable to decay.



Map: John Blanchard / The Chronicle

The pier has been fenced off since a 5.1 earthquake in late October that was centered near San Jose. There was no damage to the 60-foot-wide promenade, which now bears the name Aquatic Park Pier, but decades of harsh waves have eroded the structure's integrity, sometimes sending small chunks of concrete into the waters below.

Damage from natural forces was compounded by a near-total lack of upkeep from the National Park Service, which owns and manages Aquatic Park as part of its San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park. The neglect is no individual's fault — the park service has \$21.8 billion in deferred maintenance due to chronic lack of funding — but the impact here has been devastating.

Things will get even more devastating if the fenced-off pier is removed.

Muni Pier's value isn't simply that it offered a safe promenade with jaw-dropping views, or a good perch for fishermen. The structure muffles incoming waves; without it, high tides and harsh storms gradually would wash away the beach. More turbulent conditions also might force the maritime park to move floating landmarks like the Balclutha that dock along Hyde Street Pier.

"If the pier goes away, the historic ships can't stay," said Dan Hodapp, who is part of the citizens group lobbying for improvements, Aquatic Park & Pier Project. "The park service has an incredible resource that needs to be brought into its time."

Easier said than done: The estimated cost of rebuilding the pier approaches \$150 million. That doesn't include the budget if Aquatic Park was to receive upgrades as well.

And what might the latter include?



The vision for Aquatic Park that was completed in 2021 by the landscape architecture firm SWA includes a rebuilt pier to replace the 90-year-old one that extends 1,400 feet into the water. The conceptual design was done for the community group Aquatic Park & Pier Project. SWA

Equally important, there would be more enticing connections between Aquatic Park and the larger city. The final two blocks of Van Ness that now function as a cul-de-sac would become a landscaped gateway. Grand stairs and accessible trails would ascend Black Point to upper Fort Mason.

In other words, send a signal to the rest of San Francisco that there's more to this stretch of the waterfront than Fisherman's Wharf.

"Not a lot in Aquatic Park has changed (since 1939), but the way we live in the city has changed," Hodapp said. "We have to adapt the park and bring it forward."

For now, the emphasis is the pier. Partly at the behest of local elected officials including Stefani and fellow supervisor Aaron Peskin, Sen. Alex Padilla is seeking \$15 million in next year's federal budget to begin the design and environmental work that might pull in more funding and bring a new pier closer to reality.

"We're all trying to make this click," Stefani said. "We're on a money hunt."

Here's the frustrating thing about Municipal Pier's plight: The problem is easily fixed. Expensive, but straightforward.

We know what to do. Now let's see if it can happen.



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