Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle 2015

Dede Wilsey, shown in her home in September, has given plenty of her time and money to the Fine Arts Museums.

Not all blame is Wilsey's

I like gossip as much as the next person, but I find no joy in joining the Dede Wilsey pile-on.

Wilsey, it was reported in a Chronicle column on Monday, July 25, is stepping down as president of the board of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, after the museums agreed to pay a $2 million settlement of an employee complaint that centered on Wilsey's actions. Former Chief Financial Officer Michele Gutierrez alleged that Wilsey forced her out of her job after Gutierrez complained about a $450,000 payment of museum money to an ailing former staffer.

A representative of the museums emphasized to me that no change in Wilsey's status will take place without board action.

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Museums boards share the blame

Desmarais from page E1

The next scheduled board meeting is Oct. 18; she will be president at least until then.

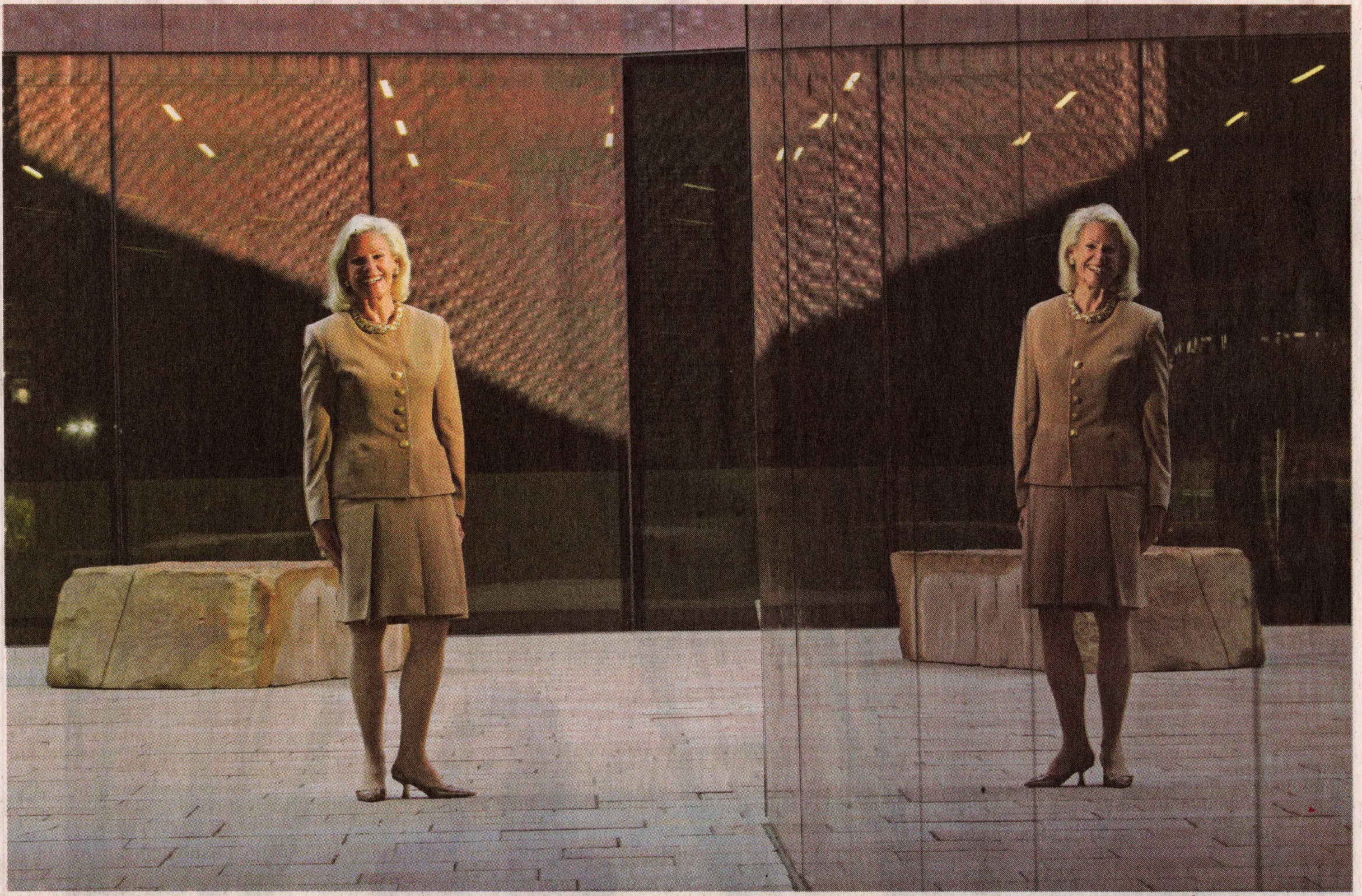
But the issue is about proper oversight of the Fine Arts Museums and accountability.

First of all, we should want the very best for two of the Bay Area's great museums, the de Young and the Legion of Honor. With a highly qualified new director now at the helm, the museums appear to be poised to get back on a track of excellence from which they had been derailed. It should be a time for celebration, not schadenfreude.

That's why I was stunned by the glee that ensued, not only in art circles but seemingly everywhere, upon word of Wilsey's ouster. It was clear that her grip on the museums had to be loosened. She had been blamed for low staff morale and a series of high-profile resignations. From all appearances, she had taken far too active a role in both governance and the day-to-day operations at the two museums. The board had — inappropriately, in my view — changed its bylaws to allow the president to be re-elected indefinitely. She had not been promised a term "for life," as has been reported. Nor did she "appoint" trustees to the board, which seems to be a common misconception — whatever her persuasive powers, board members are elected by their peers.

But this is a woman who had donated more than $10 million to the city-owned museums over the years. Even more important, she guided the institution through a $190 million capital campaign that gave San Francisco the de Young Museum's award-winning building in 2005, and she led numerous smaller fund drives for the Fine Arts Museums as well as for several other cultural and social service organizations in town.

Having given so much time and treasure, having loved the institution so thoroughly, who can blame her for feeling proprietary? And, particularly in the tough times after the death of a sitting executive director, why wouldn't she come to think of herself as the best person to lead the museum not only externally — as the elected president of the board — but also internally, as CEO, generally the province of the director?



Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle 2005

Dede Wilsey raised the $190 million in private money to build the new, publicly owned de Young Museum.

Most big donors are demanding, if not difficult — as a former museum director, I have learned the hard way. Managing those relationships can be a challenge, particularly because soliciting the big gifts means encouraging the very sense of ownership that can get out of hand.

There is but one counterweight to a heavy hitter (beyond the law, which is pretty flexible about most aspects of philanthropy and what fundraisers euphemistically call "donor stewardship"). That is the board of trustees. It falls to the board to set clear policies, to ensure that the rules are followed and to discipline its own when they are not.

If anyone is to be faulted for the recent errors of judgment at the museums, the trustees must bear a significant part of the responsibility. But who is that? The museums' governance structure is byzantine, with, technically, 105 members of three boards sharing oversight. Many trustees serve on more than one board, so the total number of individuals is lower.

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A 2012 city Performance Audit of Governance and City Support warns, "The Fine Arts Museums Board of Trustees conducts limited fiscal oversight, with that role having been charged to the private Corporation of the Fine Arts Museums (COFAM), which is responsible for operating the museums. Because COFAM meetings are not subject to the City's open meetings policies, oversight of the Museums' budget, financial audits, and facilities is not being conducted in a public or transparent manner."

In the four years since that report, at least two trustees expressed the ultimate concern by resigning. Yet the board(s) have failed to address the issue.

Now, according to Chronicle columnists Matier & Ross, at least one San Francisco supervisor is calling for hearings. The museum is out nearly $2.5 million (the settlement plus an earlier blunder) that might have been used for programs — or to replenish the reported deficit of just about that amount.

It would not have gone this way if the board had been fulfilling its duties, transparency being job one. People make mistakes; there is no shame in that, as long as the error is recognized and its cause addressed. But it is such an old story: Boards take what seems the easy way out, only to find themselves in ever deeper water.

It has long been apparent to me that any board, as a body, is different from the individuals who compose it; a board of smart people is no protection from dumb decisions. The benefit of a large board ostensibly is to spread the work. Somehow, though, when there is blame to be cast, there always seems to be but one scapegoat alone in the field, standing exposed.

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