

CBD invests \$20,000 to get its green dream toilet

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140 Turk St. to open its bathroom weekdays for the public. In May, despite a usage report showing a \$5-a-flush average cost over three months, the CBD extended the pilot six months.

A mid-pilot report in October showed, surprisingly, that the monitored usage had tripled. Data showed an average 32 users daily, compared with 11 initially, with three times as many men as women. CBD President Clint Ladine said the jump was due to a story in The Extra, a small sign at the door and word of mouth. Ladine had worried about possible expensive plumbing problems, but he said there was none.

"The storefront (toilet) was the original idea," Hilliard said of the \$1,300-a-month pilot, "and we still might do that down the road — It has nearly tripled in use since we began.

"We were looking at porto-potties when Hyphae contacted us," Hilliard said. "Now, the big question is how to handle hazardous material from street toilets."

Human waste is toxic, but dog waste isn't, she said.

"The vast majority of the incidents from the (district) report are human feces," Gia Grant, Clean City executive director, said in an email. "But it is possible that a small percentage could be dog feces. If it can't be swept with a broom, then it's reported as an incident.

Hyphae is a 4-year-old company that consults, researches and designs ecosystems. With an S.F. Arts Commission grant, it created the 2.2-acre living roof on the California Academy

of Sciences. And, in the neighborhood, it created the Luggage Store gallery's living wall, Glide's green roof and helped with the Tenderloin National Forest.

Hyphae's finished product, if it comes up with the development cash, could be ready sometime next year and would need a half dozen city permits. Each toilet would sell for between \$40,000 and \$50,000, Bucknum said. The waste would be picked up and trucked away for treatment. A security and safety feature puts a pushbutton "water station" on an outside wall, instead of having an inside wash basin.

San Francisco's 25 highly automated JCDecaux public toilets cost around \$300,000 each, he said, and require costly maintenance because they are breakdown-prone. He visited six one day and half were broken and shut, he said. A fully automated model costs \$6,000 to \$20,000 a year for water and sewer.

Hyphae's concept would not use city water and sewers and would turn the loo's human waste into fertilizer for inedible plants to pay for itself, a tall order. One of the best examples of public toilets Bucknum studied is a new prototype, similar in shape to a JCDecaux toilet, developed in Portland, Ore. But that city fell short in its desire to create a compostable waste system, and its four loos in operation are hooked up to the city's water and sewer system.

The CBD has additionally committed to handling a future toilet's maintenance costs and providing a monitor. Hilliard agreed with Bucknum that having three linked toilets would be "more bang for the buck." They

could be moved by trailer.

Independently, the two researched Portland's toilets. Hilliard spoke to Water Department spokeswoman Anne Hill about the loos. Hill told her a green toilet was "impossible."

Hill told The Extra that Portland had looked everywhere for a durable ecological toilet, but couldn't find one and couldn't invent one. "That was our only roadblock, a durable, compostable toilet."

A public toilet must be able to withstand the blows of a baseball bat, she said, and for that reason Portland toilets have heavy "penitentiary gray" commodes. "That's our urban toilet," she says. "But they must be visible. If not, they won't be used and the old problems come back."

Portland's toilets, similar in shape to San Francisco's JC Decaux toilets, have impressive features. The ADA-compliant, stainless steel portables hook up to water and sewer and are big enough to bring a bicycle inside. Their solar-powered lighting brightens when the bathroom is used, then dims. Ventilation slats at the top, and angled slats all the way around the bottom show how many feet are inside. A button-operated washing station is outside.

The toilets are open 24/7 and need no monitors.

"The city closed down a bricks-and-mortar last spring because of problems it was having," Hill said. "But I have heard no dissatisfaction with these. We've had no incidents. Do people leave things behind like bottles and syringes? Yes. But there have been no incidents and I've heard no dissatisfaction. Businesses and the

public are asking for more of them. They are happy with the results, and they're being well-used.

"People aren't taking baseball bats to them. They don't want them abused and they are collectively taking care of them."

Even so, Hilliard says the CBD likes "the idea of starting a prototype from scratch."

At the collaborative, David Lewis, of about a dozen people attending, suggested the CBD ask merchants to open their bathrooms to the public.

"We've been trying to do that for a year," said Hilliard. "We've approached St. Anthony, but they're not willing to do it."

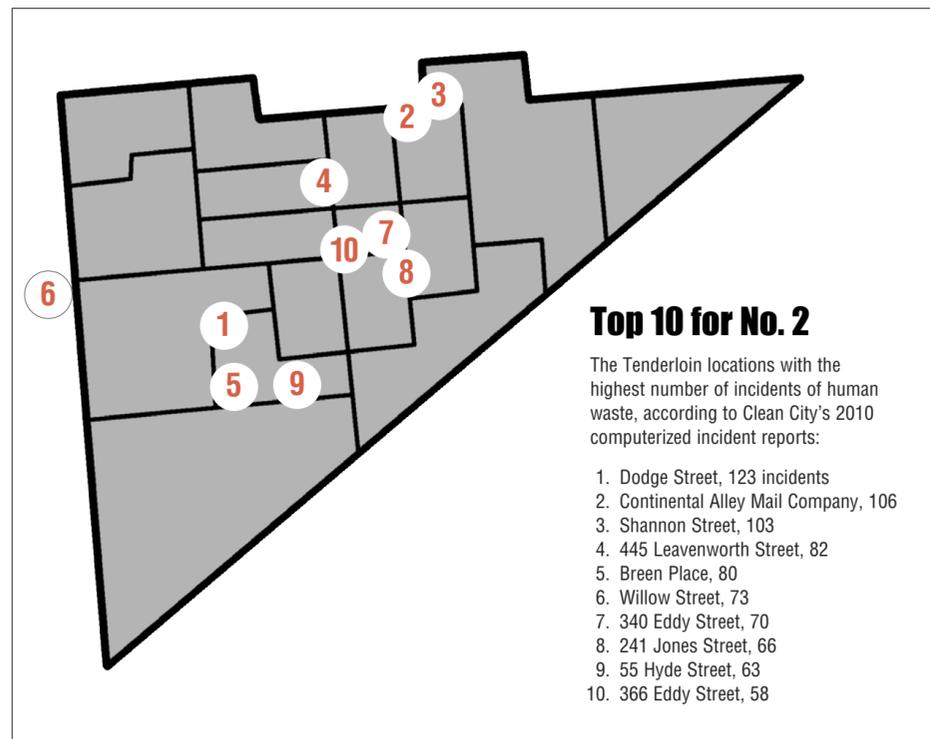
Merchants have liability concerns, Tenderloin Capt. Joe Garrity pointed out. People use a bathroom to shave and bathe, he said, and merchants "don't want certain people in there. What if someone ODs in there? Some are locked in. It's a big issue." He was certain, too, the outdoor toilets would be damaged and vandalized.

Security, safety and privacy are key issues, Bucknum said.

"With JC Decaux (toilets), no one knows what's going on inside," he said. Then he suggested the ecological bathroom could have opaque walls so police could see how many people were inside. That drew an immediate response from park advocate Betty Traynor.

"It's not appropriate," she said. "And I wouldn't use it."

Bucknum said placement of the toilets was as important as design and he hoped "the right people" would show up to weigh in at the outreach meetings. ■



TENDERLOIN STARS

Traynor is Boeddeker Park's most ardent advocate

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ker Park, named after Franciscan Father Alfred Boeddeker who founded the nearby St. Anthony's Dining Room.

But it became evident the design left something to be desired. The park's fortress-like fence and up-and-down levels hampered visibility. Its low-lying shrubbery and fenced, warden-like sections were cover for dope dealing and usage. The community was alarmed and officers from the Tenderloin Police Station across the street had an ongoing headache. That is, when the park was open. Recent budget cuts now have closed the park on weekends and pared the weekday hours that it is open to adults to 15. Still, Rec and Park sometimes closes the park with no notice.

Traynor, 66, started with Boeddeker as a Parks Council staffer. She was assigned in 2003

to form a community advisory group at Boeddeker. The park had one year ago but it dissolved.

Traynor went to Tenant Associations Coalition, the Tenderloin Futures Collaborative and other neighborhood organizations "to get something going for the park."

THE CONSTANT FACILITATOR

A newly formed Friends of Boeddeker Park met with her in the clubhouse in 2003. They agreed to reach consensus for important decisions and rotate the role as chair. The only Friend who attended regularly, though, was Traynor, and she soon became facilitator.

"Once I left the Council, I started other groups, but Boeddeker was my favorite," she says.

She left the Parks Council in 2004 because of a death in her family. As the Council's park stewardship manager, she had helped start Friends' groups at Lafayette Park and Bayview's Palou Mini Park, among others. She learned that Friends groups without leaders soon die.

"I loved the park and the people and there was a great need for it. I gave up all my other Friends groups. I thought if I left (Boeddeker), it might not survive. Other people who came (to meetings) had their other organizations and weren't able to follow up. But I figured I could."

Traynor goes back 60 years with the Tenderloin and smiles at the memories. Her mother's best friend, Erma Bowers, lived in the Hyland Hotel, an SRO with a nice lobby, now gone. As a little girl, she and her mother often visited Bowers. "She had a tiny kitchen and a hot plate, but we'd sometimes eat at Original Joe's across the street," Traynor

said. "She gave me my first watch. And an old man, blind Johnny, used to put his hand on my head and say, 'My, you've grown.'"

"To me it was a fascinating part of the city." Traynor leads meetings in her unflappable, methodical style, looking seriously at each speaker to hear them out, guiding rambles back to the topic, and, at some point, learns whether a proposal has support.

"We've always gotten as many as possible agreeing before we recommend something — Ellis Street was like that," she says.

Besides drug dealing and gambling at domino games inside the park, messy derelicts and boozers loitered at the Ellis Street gate to the north, some staggering down the park's wide, red brick sidewalk to the Eddy Street entrance across from the police station. People in the park felt threatened or annoyed. The Friends thought closing the gate permanently would stop it. Police concurred and Rec and Park locked that gate for good in 2004. It solved that problem.

From the time Traynor began at the park, residents of Presentation Senior Community — the building adjacent to the park in the north corner — were active. Some, like resident Dan Stein and Presentation's executive director and his assistant, were regulars at Friends' meetings. Soon the Friends were staging monthly park cleanups and flowerbed plantings. Rec and Park dispatched a gardener to distribute tools and supervise.

"Sometimes Glide had people there, some schools — Gateway High School, I remember, came until that program ran out," says Traynor, who has attended every session.

The Preservation seniors have been the steadiest group presence, up to 20 mostly Asian women in their 70s and 80s who work until noon. Preservation generously offered volunteers tea and coffee and sweets before, and a hot lunch after.

"It was funny," Traynor says over tea, breaking a smile, her eyes brightening. "You'd thank them for coming — and they'd thank us, too! One, I remember, walked with a cane and

wouldn't sit down. She picked up a broom. Some brought grandchildren. It was often generations working together."

The Boeddeker group, recommended by Rec and Park, won a Community Hero Award May 2, 2009, from the Crissy Field Center in the Presidio. "Rosemary and sage replace needles and syringes," the center's website said of their work. The seniors and Traynor had been on video in advance for the film presentation that day.

Now, with the park closed weekends, and the makeover due to start next year and to last 18 months, participation stopped several months ago. But Traynor vows to get "that working again."

Traynor's experience with city government, nonprofits and private enterprise, coupled with her drive, has made her the face of Boeddeker Park. Over the years she's successfully arranged for new playground equipment, an artist-designed bulletin board, music performances, and art and tai chi classes. She is well-connected, well-liked, plus she knows where the city and nonprofit grants are and how to land them. She has gotten them from SF Beautiful, the city's Challenge program, S.F. Parks Trust, S.F. Arts Commission and the Tenderloin CBD.

For months, the park has been open weekdays to adults only from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. But it has been opened many weekends because Traynor scored grants to cover costs. And when Boeddeker fell off the People in Plazas list for noontime music concerts a couple of years ago, Traynor had the solution, turning as she often has, to the neighborhood benefit district for a grant to bring music back in the park.

PARK CLOSED WEEKENDS

Former CBD Executive Director Elaine Zamora, as well as current director, Dina Hilliard, have been very responsive to Traynor and Boeddeker. Zamora, now the CBD's liaison to the Friends group, has known Traynor six years.

"I think very highly of Betty and I am honored to work with her on park issues," Zamora says. "She worked tirelessly to assure that Boeddeker (would be renovated). She continues to work hard to assure that funding and support is in place and the renovation is successful."

Hilliard says the park redesign "would not be happening" if not for Traynor, who she describes as "completely unassuming and dedicated." She recalled an afternoon three years ago when she, Traynor, Zamora and Capt. Gary Jimenez worked on the clubhouse.

"She cleaned as if it were her own home, spraying down and scrubbing surfaces, mopping and organizing," Hilliard said.

"At the end of the workday, she compiled a list of items that needed replacing and used Friends of Boeddeker Park funding to promptly replace those items. If I recall, the list included a carpet for the reading area, books and sports equipment.

"I don't know if anyone ever noticed the cleaner clubhouse, or new items, but I know those acts served our community in an important way."

Traynor's father was a Muni driver. The family lived in Daly City before moving to the Outer Mission under a rule — new then, but discarded years ago — mandating city employees live in San Francisco. Whichever school Betty attended, though, her mother was a constant volunteer. At school functions, even into her Mercy High School days, Traynor's mother's baked-goods booth sold out first and famously made the most money.

"I guess I learned from that — she got involved," says Traynor, who lives in Jackson Square, an easy bus ride from the park. "It's hard for me to stop."

Traynor graduated from S.F. State in 1966 with a biology degree, then did grad work in molecular biology at Cal. Grant-funded lab research followed school. When the grants ran out, she turned to editing medical reports. "It took me away from lab work," she says, and for good.

She eventually started her own small, academic research company in 1982 that published reports for its subscribers on funding available for bio-medical science, arts and humanities.

VOLUNTEERS WHEREVER SHE GOES

When she moved the business to the Redstone Building on 16th Street, she soon became its tenant organizer, a cog in the movement for its historic landmark status and coordinator of the neighborhood association. After 20 years, though, the Internet was taking over, subscriptions to her reports were drying up and she retired.

It hardly meant slowing down. In 2005, besides her Boeddeker commitment, she joined the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and became part of the planning for Kid Power Park on Hoff Street near 16th Street where she was community garden coordinator until 2010.

Recent months have brought a confusing, shifting park scene for Traynor. On one hand, Boeddeker is at its lowest point of use. On the other, the renovation eventually will bring a stunning open space improvement in the middle of the Tenderloin. Unknown is whether anemic city coffers can recover and restore park staffing. Rec and Park Director Phil Ginsburg has vowed to keep Boeddeker open. But at what level?

"We'll keep meeting while Boeddeker is closed," Traynor says. "We need to work on a plan for now and for the opening. Maybe we need to research other parks, too, and see what they're doing. I don't want (Boeddeker) to die. And with a possible change of mayors, who knows?"

Traynor believes a combination of dedicated volunteers and staff can keep the park open, and maybe a nonprofit organization can figure it out.

"We've got to be creative — unless a miracle happens with Rec and Park and they can hire staff. People deserve to have Boeddeker." ■

Betty Traynor (far left) was a proud member of the Boeddeker Park cleanup crew that received a Community Hero award in 2009 from the Crissy Field Center.



PHOTO: COURTESY CRISSY FIELD CENTER