

Surcharge at restaurants in city growing

State, national experts say it's an only-in-S.F. trend

By **JOHNATHAN NEWMAN**

IF YOU DINED OUT in San Francisco in the last seven years, you probably encountered the infamous surcharge noted at the bottom of your check. You know the one. The wording varies from restaurant to restaurant, but usually contains some version of "SF employer mandated surcharge" followed by the restaurant's calculations, adding 2.5% to 4.5% or more to the bottom line cost of your dining experience.

Guess what? The practice of surcharging customers — originally promoted as a mean-spirited way to pay for restaurant workers' health care — isn't going away. Local industry watchers and city administrators believe it's here to stay — and it's growing.

Gwyneth Borden, executive director of the Golden Gate Restaurant Association, expects more restaurants to impose a surcharge on food and beverages, a practice that began in 2008 as a way of scapegoating the city for requiring health care for workers. Borden noted that a business has a right to exact a surcharge for any purpose.

"More and more have found that it is a reasonable way to maintain control of certain costs — not only the San Francisco health care costs, but the increased local minimum wage requirements, which will go into effect this year, as well as rising rents in the city and, for some, the

increased costs of maintaining a reliable flow of goods and produce from local sources," she said.

The city Office of Labor Standards Enforcement in 2013 found that 188 employers reported collecting \$14,966,306 in surcharges from their customers to cover "in whole or in part" the cost of employee health care benefits.

Reporting the surcharges is voluntary, so more restaurants likely apply this bottom line booster, or they don't

have 20 or more employees, the trigger for requiring health care, a traditional fringe benefit many restaurants begrudge their workers apparently.

The city's annual reporting doesn't ask employers what business they're in, only the number of workers, the type of health care coverage and how much they paid for it. Whether all 188 employers who reported the surcharge were restaurants is unknown, but there's no evidence that industries other than restaurants are surcharging.

In all, 4,393 employers citywide reported paying \$2.1 billion for health care for an average of 258,091 workers each quarter. Employers with 20 to 99 workers last year paid \$1.55 per hour on top of minimum wage for health care coverage. This year the rate increases to \$1.65. Businesses with 100 or more employees pay \$2.48 per hour, which on top of the current \$11.05 minimum wage is clearly a sizable, arguably unfair, sudden blow to the restaurants' bottom line.

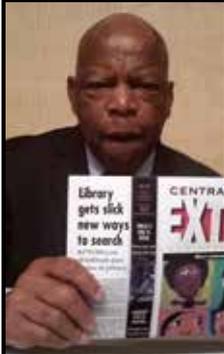
While acknowledging that the dining surcharge raised some customers' hackles at first, Borden believes a grudging acceptance is now in place.

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Easy work, few requirements

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FEWEST TREES IN CITY

Tenderloin's canopy: 4.1%

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CENTRAL CITY



SAN FRANCISCO

TENDERLOIN TREES



DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION LISE STAMPFLI

Trees, among the many endangered species in the Tenderloin, will be in the spotlight, likely in May, when Friends of the Urban Forest will help property owners plant several dozen trees, the first mass planting in the neighborhood since 2011.

Touch of green in TL

Band-Aid coming to patch up hood's tattered canopy

By **MARJORIE BEGGS**

SAN FRANCISCO HAS 105,000 trees on its sidewalks and median strips and an estimated 500,000 more in parks and backyards. Trees aid air quality and are good for property values. They improve people's physical and mental health, combat climate change, welcome wildlife, manage stormwater runoff, reduce wind, encourage commercial areas' vitality. One study even found that people drive less aggressively on tree-lined streets.

Sounds good — 600,000-plus trees — but it's not.

The city's tree canopy, the layer of leaves, branches and stems that covers our 49 square miles when viewed from above, is just 13.7%, according to a 2012 Planning Department survey. That percentage puts us far down the list of U.S. cities, near the bottom with Chicago and Jersey City, and is less than half the 33% average of metropolitan areas.

The news is worse for the Tenderloin and SoMa: They're at the very bottom of the city's canopy list with trees covering just a shade over 4% in both neighborhoods. By comparison, gloriously green Golden Gate Park tops the list, with 47.7% coverage.

A tree's chance of making it in the Tender-

loin is probably about the same as a resident's. Not so good. And at least one study confirmed that like people, trees have a harder time thriving here than elsewhere in the city.

Owner neglect, vandalism, vehicle emissions and cars and trucks running over small trees take their toll.

"Three years after planting, TL trees have only a 60% to 70% chance of thriving," says Phil Pierce, Friends of the Urban Forest policy and outreach director. "Citywide, it's 80%."

Tree tales are relevant today because another Tenderloin planting is scheduled for this spring, probably in May. Friends of the Urban Forest will coordinate the effort — as it has more than a dozen times before — and is expecting at least 50 trees to go in this time.

Tenderloin trees have been a Central City Extra focus almost since we began publishing.

"The Re-greening of the Tenderloin," our November 2004 lead story, detailed the planting of 35 trees donated by TL property owner and co-founder of Adopt-A-Block, Charles Mosser, and coordinated by Friends of the Urban Forest.

"Trees," Mosser told The Extra back then, "give a flourish to the neighborhood. They make it seem more residential than commercial."

Friends of the Urban Forest has been part of almost every TL planting since 1982, a year after it formed. Our re-greening story reported that, in 18 years, Friends of the Urban Forest had organized neighbors and planted — or replanted — 523 trees in the Tenderloin.

How many of those trees are still standing, how many were replacements for dead

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