

First transit study rooted in community

3 neighborhood nonprofits ensure public input on public transportation

BY PHIL TRACY

A few dozen people gathered in the St. Boniface Church community room Feb. 28 to weigh in on the future of transit in the Tenderloin. They didn't get to ask a lot of questions or make speeches but their input was noted. Whether it changes things for the better remains to be seen, but it felt better than a stick in the eye.

Rachel Hiatt, a planner for the county Transportation Authority, said the meeting was midway through a one-year study by the Bay Area Metropolitan Commission, one of a bundle of neighborhood-based transportation plans throughout the region, including a sister study in the Outer Mission. This is San Francisco's first official transportation study to grow from the grassroots, Hiatt said.

"We want to come up with a set of projects that came from your input, which can be implemented in the next few years," Hiatt said. The people tell the experts, not the experts telling the people.

Whether the Tenderloin community will show more foresight than typical traffic planners is anybody's guess. But if they don't suggest a freeway through Golden Gate Park they'll come out ahead of Caltrans.

The project acquired a community outreach team — Tenderloin Housing Clinic, Asian Neighborhood Design and the Southeast Asian Community Center — "to ensure community input at every stage," according to Chris Mills of Tenderloin Housing Clinic.

Interface with the community began with questions, some surprising and wildly inappropriate, from five people Hiatt picked out.

A homeless man, Jonathan Ramey, asked if the plan could include additional free street toilets. Indeed it could, Hiatt stoutly replied.

A second questioner was incensed by bicycles on the sidewalks: "Why don't we simply fine them \$100 and take their bicycles away?"

"Why don't you mention to the stinking Police Department that they have turn signals on their cars and why don't they use them?" asked a third.

Next was an altogether reasonable question:

How will the community-based transportation plan fit into other citywide transportation plans? Hiatt danced around for lack of an answer.

Can express buses moving through the Tenderloin be turned into local service? asked the fifth person. No answer.

Hiatt moved on to the next part of the program, a variation of Pin the Tail on the Donkey, but without blindfolds. People formed groups of four or five around six stations, each with a poster on an easel. They were to answer the questions on the posters by adhering a half-inch dot next to their answer — in effect, a vote.

In ranking transit needs, people most favored reducing fares and crowding on Muni buses. Two groups voted for buses and bike lanes over car lanes, more room in Muni shelters.

Bonnie Nelson of Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates, the technical team working on the plan, noted that more parking as a transit need failed to collect a single vote. "Overwhelming," she said.

At one station, the question was whether there should be more short-term parking spaces for shoppers or all-day parking for commuters. Nearly all the 20 dots were right in the middle of the graph.

"Everyone says, 'There should be a mix. We don't really have a priority for those spaces, it should be a mix.'" Nelson said. "It's always interesting when the consensus is right down the middle."

A man in the audience balked. "Excuse me. I think you're missing something. What we're saying is — we don't care about parking, we like public transit." And how — a project report shows 82% of Tenderloin households do not have a car.

Asked to prioritize seven projects from earlier studies, people split on expanding the availability of lifeline pass for low-income people and making intersections safer with more curb bulbs and ramps.

Two write-in ideas checked by multiple responders were more pedestrian countdown signals and compelling BART to reopen the Civic Center station restrooms.

Hiatt said a \$2.7 million Lifeline Grant is to be awarded to San Francisco this spring. (The Lifeline Grant is a Metropolitan Transportation Commission program to help counties provide transit services to

low-income people.)

Hiatt is intent on applying for a piece of the MTC pie for the Tenderloin, she said.

"I think this area has several factors that make it extremely attractive to funding agencies looking to impact community transit needs," she said.

At meeting's end, Nelson summarized: "It looks like the most important things are reducing the cost of transit for low-income people, reducing crowding on the Muni and reducing the speed of cars going through the Tenderloin. Improving the reliability of transit and improving pedestrian safety are also important to you.

"Least important was increasing the parking availability. Really, what you're most interested in is better, cheaper, more reliable transit, and a better place to walk. Those are the priorities."

Community involvement in the Tenderloin transit study will continue through the summer. Neighbor walking tours and public workshops are planned for late spring. People can contact the Tenderloin-Little Saigon Neighborhood Transportation Plan through the County Transportation Authority Web site www.sfcta.org. To get on a mailing list for upcoming events, e-mail tenderloin@sfcta.org or write to Hiatt at S.F. County Transportation Authority, 100 Van Ness Ave. 26th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94102. ■



PHOTO BY PHILIP NGUYEN

Rachel Hiatt at the transit forum at St. Boniface.

Tenderloin benefit district deposits \$484,000

Sidewalks being cleaned, sweepers getting trained, feds at U.N. Plaza coming aboard

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

A short, intense two years after a handful of property owners and owner reps began talking about forming a community benefit district in the Tenderloin, money has started flowing into the organization's coffers.

At the March 2 interim board meeting of the new

nonprofit that oversees the benefit district, General Manager Elaine Zamora announced that the city — which collects the special assessment with property tax bills — has deposited \$484,000 into the benefit district's bank account.

That's about half the \$927,000 revenues anticipated for all of 2006. As with payment of all property taxes, laggards get late penalties; scofflaws face liens. The first tax installment was due Dec. 10, and it looks like most have paid, said Zamora, a key mover in the CBD formation who is taking a leave from her private law practice to manage the district's first year of operation.

"It's a little ahead of what we expected to have by this time, and we've already started writing checks against it," she said.

The Tenderloin/North of Market Community Benefit District became official in August when a majority of owners approved the self-tax.

Every property in the 29-square-block area gets taxed, with assessments based on the lot's square footage and its frontage's linear footage. The Hilton's 2006 tab is almost \$60,000, while a condo owner at 631 O'Farrell pays \$25. The city owes about \$46,000 for its properties in the district.

Only one federal government building, 50 U.N. Plaza, falls within the district, but the feds can't be assessed by a local jurisdiction, Zamora said.

"From the start, federal officials supported our efforts," she explained in an e-mail to The Extra. "We needed to be creative. The building's property managers said if we could provide a basis for the service, they could pay a fee. Now, we're drawing up a fee-for-service contract to justify services as close as possible to the \$22,238 assessment."

The district's services so far have been cleaning sidewalks, gutters and graffiti, handled through a \$674,000 annual contract with Clean City Coalition. The 15-year-old nonprofit trains low-income and homeless to do street sweeping and other improvement activities.

Sixteen people in the TL have been trained and hired to sweep sidewalks with a broom twice a day and remove litter from gutters several days a week, said Gia Grant, Clean City executive director. They work up to 20 hours a week, earn \$8.82 to \$11.02 an hour and get job placement help. The benefit district pays only the wages.

Other workers operate three sidewalk steamers and two Tenant mechanical sidewalk sweepers, which Clean City acquired from the now-defunct TSIP, a program sponsored by the North of Market Neighborhood Improvement Corp.

While the cleaning goes forward, the benefit district wrestles with policy and process as it gains its organizational legs. Should the general manager be a voting board member? (The six "ayes" had it, though there were three no's and five abstentions.)

Zamora is an independent contractor, but should she be an employee? ("At some point we need to decide if we want to preserve the idea of the manager as independent contractor," said board member and Hastings CFO David Seward. "We need to revisit this when we're no longer an interim board." Zamora said the time is now: The city is pressing all the benefit districts on this question.)

What's to be done about the many groups that are queuing up to interest the board in their projects? ("There's always a parade when people find out there's money," said Geoffrey Grier, board member and Recovery Theatre director.) The group decided Zamora will deflect requests that don't fit the district's mission, and those that do fit will get three minutes each during the public comment period at board meetings. ■

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