

Gum never sleeps — Mayor turns trash into political hay

BY PHIL TRACY

MAYOR Gavin Newsom chose June 21, the summer solstice, to announce the results of San Francisco's first ever audit of street litter. Using the time-honored method of issuing a ringing denunciation to garner a headline, Newsom declared chewing gum to be public enemy No. 1 and decried McDonald's as the top repeat offender in the category of brand name litter.

The litter audit, which cost \$25,000, according to Mark Westlund, public outreach program manager of the city's Department of the Environment, was conducted from April 9 through 20. The audit made separate counts of large litter and small litter on 105 sites chosen randomly by computer. Five of those sites were in the Tenderloin: they yielded 3.7% total of the small litter, suggesting the neighborhood is pretty clean. Statistically, the hood should have hit 5% of the small litter total. There was no ranking of sites by large litter items.

Actually, the mayor was talking apples and oranges. Chewing gum was part of the comprehensive, statistically valid, 49-page "Street Litter Audit" while McDonald's designation comes by way of a subjective, 21-page "Branded Litter Survey," designed to demonize the enormously unpopular fast food chain. Facing no credible opponent, the mayor has wisely elected to run against McDonald's litter and Safeway plastic bags.

In the case of chewing gum, the method the auditor selected — accumulated litter vs. fresh litter — ensured the age-old sticky enemy would hog the lion's share of vitriol for messing up the streets.

To paraphrase Neil Young, gum never sleeps. Adhere it to the sidewalk and it stays there forever: last night's gum lying side by side with gum from the Summer of Love. When the city chose that "accumulated litter" methodology over the "fresh litter" approach, for which the sidewalk is scoured

clean and fresh litter allowed to accumulate anew. It guaranteed gum would come in No. 1. Indeed, 946 pieces were spotted, handsomely outdistancing second-place "small glass."

McDonald's repeat offender title in the brand name litter category was more a question of semantics. With 3,812 pieces of large litter observed during the 12-day audit, the auditors could only muster up 53 identifiable items as coming from McDonald's. This represented 1.39% of the large litter observed and included cups, paper bags, Styrofoam containers, paper boxes and one item mysteriously listed as "other packaging," none of which totaled more than 15 items per category.

That number, 15, is important. On the very first page of the Branded Litter Survey it states, "Only a few soft drink beverage containers were brand-identified by auditors (20 containers in total). We deem this sample to be too small to be statistically valid for commenting on the distribution of soft container brands on San Francisco streets." Thus all the different subcategories of McDonald's-branded litter are so much statistically invalid campaign electioneering. Not to mention the rest of the Branded Litter Survey. Tootsie Roll beat Hersheys in the confectionery-candy wrap division: meaningless. The meaning of Trident's 3 to 1 lead in the gum wrapping category: nada. Even Muni's astonishing 43.1% share of the ticket/transfer/receipts litter is just so much garbage, statistically speaking.

Turns out San Francisco isn't nearly as dirty as people might think. The litter audit's executive summary makes the point that San Francisco averaged 23 items per site, compared to 21 small-litter items per site for Toronto, which has been counting litter and cleaning up for several years now. Most other audited cities average a small litter rate twice as high as San Francisco's.

There also are fewer cigarette butts on the

ground in San Francisco, where only 5.6% of small litter items were cigarette butts compared to 14.8% on the streets of Toronto. San Franciscans' well-known aversion to smoking is apparent in the litter on its streets.

Our litter also reflects the efficiency of our entrepreneurial scavengers. A total of six beer cans and 12 soft drink cans were found citywide, a testament to the industriousness of the homeless and little old Asian ladies.

Mark McKenney is a widely respected environmental consultant. His core proficiencies include litter auditing. He was project manager for a series of five litter audits done for Toronto between 2002 and 2006. He devised the methodology for the San Francisco audit and wrote the report.

He says he's not surprised by the findings. "California has a strong container-redemption law so you would expect low counts on the bottles and cans. It's well-known everywhere that San Francisco has some of the strongest anti-smoking laws. People who don't smoke don't drop cigarette butts on the ground."

McKenney says while the litter piece per site rate was relatively low, it was equally clear that some outlying areas "hadn't been cleaned in a very long time."

The good news is that because the method used in the city's litter audit is statistically valid, the audit can be replicated in the future and the city's progress in fighting litter can be charted with a fair degree of certainty.

Newsom included in the audit's announcement a pledge to reduce the city's litter by 50% over the next five years, so it's nice to know we have a handy way of checking whether that goal is attained. Let's hope the mayor's promise doesn't go the way of Willie Brown's pledge to "fix Muni in the first hundred days of my administration." ■

Architects show ideas for Boeddeker makeover

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

like they couldn't turn their back on it. It didn't just strike a nerve, it was their hearts."

The volunteering architects are Michelle Dubin, Lisa Fisher, Steve Hanson and Megan Walker from EDAW; Nancy Fleming, Raphael Justewicz, Conard Lindgren, Melissa McCann, Tomer Maymon and Makie Suzuki from Sasaki; and Sissily Harrell, Eleanor Pries and Deanna VanBuren from SMWM.

They were expecting to donate just a few hours but spent two weeks, not counting two Friends meetings and their half-day examination-tour of the park. Their aims were to make the park inviting, improve the main entrance, maintain security, enhance recreational facilities, provide multiple-use areas, activate the park's edges and use colorful material. They expect their plan to stimulate public input and more designs, Gilchrist said.

Mayor Dianne Feinstein no sooner renamed the then-7-year-old Central City park after Father Alfred Boeddeker at its reopening in 1985, than the 2.5-acre plot became a drug-seller's haven. Improvements during the 1990s — such as a new children's playground, new fencing and additional lawn — gave the park more spark. But drug dealing and loitering persisted. Police have toned the scene down and volunteers these days regularly spruce up outdoors and inside the community building. Still, the park is prone to relapses.

PARK SCARY TO SOME

Its design has been criticized as "defensive." The surrounding spiky, 6-foot-high fencing is uninviting, even foreboding. The only operating gate opens to a bench-lined, brick walk through the middle, called "the gauntlet" for its regular raucous crews of sedentary idlers. Some people are afraid to walk in, including one of the architects, a woman who has lived nearby for a couple of years but never set foot inside the park until she began work on the project.

Some complain that the park has too many sections, or pockets, and lacks a feeling of openness.

The architects' design splits the park into two districts and opens up the western half.

The design does away with the Eddy-Jones gate, the clock and outdoor toilet, and puts in four steps stretching about 12 feet along Eddy. But they don't lead anywhere and would no doubt be ideal for sitting. Fencing would separate them from a multiuse court, including basketball, running north the length of the park and fenced off from Jones. East of that, a large circular lawn with a walkway around, to resemble Yerba Buena Gardens, would be the park center. A playground would rim the western part of lawn.

CAFE AND OUTDOOR MOVIES

On Eddy, at the middle of the park's southern boundary, a small cafe would rise like a two-story kiosk, its north-west wall also to serve as an outdoor movie screen. Next to the cafe would be more steps up to the main gate, next to the existing community house, which would become two stories with activities on each floor.

From the main gate, a rising ramp would run north to the Ellis gate, dividing the park. A community building would be built at Ellis. In back of it, a large sloping garden area would expand toward Presentation Senior Community whose volunteers regularly join park cleanups and flower planting.

A walk-through tunnel under the ramp would link the sections.

The score of people in attendance seemed stunned and excited by the plan. Some called it "amazing," another "lovely." But several had reservations.

"The steps will be an issue," said Elaine Zamora, the North of Market/Tenderloin CBD director, seeing them as a magnet for loiterers. "But it all has an amazing potential impact."

Putting up more buildings was not a good idea, one woman said, and Gilchrist agreed it was controversial. Eliminating the Eddy and Jones clock was questionable, another said, and getting rid of the green and gold JCDuceaux toilet there was a problem smothered in red tape. For example, after five years of public controversy, it is still undecided

where to put a Duceaux in the Haight-Ashbury, though the Department of Public Works has one of the Johns ready to go.

"It wouldn't cost the city anything to move it," Dan McKenna, DPW's deputy chief in charge of mapping, said of the Boeddeker commode. "We get one free move a year from the contract. But it is increasingly difficult to find a site that meets the guidelines, and it has to have the property owner's approval."

Following that is a public hearing after which the hearing officer makes a ruling. Then an appeal process puts it before the Board of Permit Appeals for a final determination.

"Ideally," McKenna says, "it could take six months. But we're still going on in the Haight-Ashbury after five years."

Gilchrist said a week later that the clock would go back into the plans and the architects would reconsider the toilet issue before redrawing a plan for a public meeting probably two months away.

At the June 14 meeting, Tenderloin Police Capt. Gary Jimenez asked if the park would be any easier to get into at night, which would pose a problem for his officers.

'WON'T LOOK LIKE A JAIL'

Security wouldn't require any more attention than it does now, Gilchrist said, but the park will "open up" and be easier to see into.

"Yes," agreed Worth, "and it won't look like you're in a jail."

Traynor was concerned that the cafe would compete with existing neighborhood stores. No one asked who would run it. This and other issues, Traynor said, would be grist for the "community process" when the PowerPoint presentation will be made again at another, larger meeting. First, she said, the Friends of Boeddeker must involve Rec and Park's capital division and also see what grants might be available through the San Francisco Parks Trust.

"But this (plan) is what a lot of contractors do ask for," Zamora said, "and it's the starting point we're looking for." ■