

Little Saigon now official — a 2-block cultural gateway

BY HEIDI SWILLINGER

IT'S in stone now — literally. Two marble pillars unveiled in the Tenderloin on July 15 cap a five-year quest to establish Little Saigon — the cultural and commercial center of the city's Vietnamese community.

The 3.5-ton pillars at Eddy and Larkin streets, each adorned with a mythical creature denoting prosperity, mark the official entrance to a Tenderloin neighborhood with roughly 300 Vietnamese-owned businesses. The community was established by refugees who fled Vietnam after the 1975 fall of Saigon.

The Board of Supervisors approved the Little Saigon designation for the two-block stretch of Larkin between Eddy and O'Farrell streets in 2003. City Administrator Ed Lee said the city kicked in \$72,000 — roughly half of the money; the Vietnamese community contributed the rest.

The new pillars sport five layers of anti-graffiti coating, as well as a ring of pigeon spikes to discourage roosting. Neighborhood association groups will be responsible for upkeep, Lee said. Among them are the Southeast Asian Community Center, Vietnamese Elderly Mutual Assistance Association, Vietnamese Veterans' Association, Vietnamese Community Center, Vietnamese Women Mutual Assistance Association, Au Co Vietnamese Cultural Center and the Vietnamese Merchants Association.

Lee says the city is home to about 20,000 Vietnamese. Many live in the Tenderloin, and Lee, among others, credits their presence and hard work for helping to transform a neighborhood with too many empty storefronts and gritty sidewalks. "They're taking over formerly blighted buildings," he said. "You see less blocks that seem abandoned and uncared for."

Although the Little Saigon designation applies to the two-block stretch of Larkin, "the real Little Saigon is much bigger," according to Philip Nguyen, executive director of the Southeast Asian Community Center. Vietnamese-owned businesses are spread over a 12-block area — to the south as far as McAllister Street and to the north as far as Geary Street. Next to the Larkin Street stretch, the biggest concentration of businesses is on Ellis Street between Hyde and Polk, says Nguyen.

The neighborhood's special designation has the potential to lure even more businesses, said Lee, who anticipates shops and specialty stores designed to attract tourists. "They want to establish themselves as a good destination point," he said.

Community leaders can also apply for grants and funding for additional improvements, such as art and greening projects, said Lee.

Many in the crowd at the July 15 dedication ceremony said the pillars are a good start. "The Tenderloin has come a long way, from what I hear," said Bert Nguyen, who moved from Orange County to study at Hastings College of the Law. "This will help continue the upward trend."

Ahn Tran, one of a contingent of San Jose residents who turned out for the dedication, added that the new pillars are an inspiration to San Jose's much larger Vietnamese community, which is working to estab-

lish a permanent Little Saigon designation of its own.

Philip Nguyen pointed out that the pillars also serve as a concrete symbol of endurance and adaptability. "We are a group of people uprooted from our own country," he said. "Little Saigon reminds us of our roots and why we are here."

A fund-raising dinner to cover costs and upkeep for the pillars is set for Aug. 17, said Nguyen. For more information, contact him at 885-2743. ■



Mythical marble animals called kyllins usher in visitors to Little Saigon. PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Asbestos found at SomArts' Port facility

BY HEIDI SWILLINGER

THE eviction notice from the Port of San Francisco couldn't have come at a worse time for SomArts, the South of Market arts organization that provides staging and lighting for neighborhood events throughout the city.

Port officials had warned SomArts that it might have to clear out of the Pier 70 warehouse where it stores staging equipment after a January storm damaged the roof. Executive Director Ernest Rivera hoped to work out an arrangement that would allow SomArts to stay while repairs were made. But Port spokeswoman Renee Dunn said architects who inspected the historic warehouse discovered asbestos, which meant the building had to be vacated for a repair job she estimated would take six months.

The Port issued a formal 30-day eviction notice in June, just as SomArts was preparing for its busiest season of the year. Between August and October, the organization will stage numerous community events, including Japantown's Nihonmachi Street Fair, Bernal Heights' Outdoor Cinema screenings,

Xicana Moratorium Day in Dolores Park; the Community Day Gospel Festival in the Bayview and the Blues Festival at Fort Mason.

"If we don't have a place to store our equipment, we can't build stages. We'd have to shut down," said Mary Molly Mullaney, SomArts office manager.

The organization has rented warehouse space from the Port since 1996, said Mullaney. Before that, SomArts stored its scaffolding, handicap lifts and other staging equipment at its cultural center at 934 Brannan St. The storage space has since been transformed into an art gallery, she said.

In addition to the eviction notice, Port officials informed Rivera rents will go up if he opts to move back when repairs are finished. Dunn says SomArts currently pays below-market rates for warehouse and outdoor storage space at Pier 70. The warehouse space could go up from 45 cents per square foot to as much as \$1.10; outdoor space, which SomArts currently rents for 20 cents per square foot, could go up to 32 cents, said Dunn.

She said Port officials tried to find alternative space for SomArts, "but there's nothing available at the rate they're paying now. We don't have anything comparable."

SomArts has put out feelers for a new location, but, said Mullaney, "It's hard to find that sort of industrial space anymore, now that Mission Bay is developing.

People don't want to be next to the ugly warehouse."

In the end, Rivera and Port officials worked out a deal during a meeting in late July. SomArts will empty the warehouse by September so that repairs can begin, but will continue to store equipment outdoors at its current rental rate. Rents will go up when repairs are finished, but Rivera hopes the Port will negotiate.

For now, he's happy. "I feel the Port has recognized the value of the tenant," he said. "Rather than dismissing us and sending us away, they're willing to work with us — and that's what I wanted all along." ■

SOUTHSIDE

Hyde Street P.O. to go full service

BY TOM CARTER

THE Civic Center Post Office at 101 Hyde St. that Tenderloin activists fought to improve will be renovated and upgraded to full service "hopefully" by the holidays, officials said at a public meeting in the State Building.

"We want it open by December," Jim Wigdel, post office spokesman, said at the June 19 meeting.

After interior renovations, which could take two months, Civic Center will become a two-window retail facility, Wigdel said. Staff will handle express, international and registered mail and rental boxes, sell stamps, weigh parcels and serve general delivery patrons. A drop box for letters will be in the lobby. Whether the facility will handle passport applications will be determined by the U.S. State Department, but that isn't considered part of full service, officials said. No exterior changes are planned.

Renovation will reduce the number of rental boxes by about half, to 3,000 or 4,000, Wigdel said. He assured patrons they will keep their current box numbers. He later said that 2,160 of the available 6,035 boxes are rented.

Operating hours will be determined after analyzing hours of other full service stations, Wigdel said. Currently, the post office is open weekdays, 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and Saturdays, 7:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

For the past two years the post office shaved six evening hours off its open lobby time, had no working stamp machine and closed its mail drop boxes.

Meanwhile, as foot traffic diminished inside, drug dealing on the sidewalk increased. These issues, plus lack of retail service, brought neighborhood forces together.

More than 40 people attended the meeting, including Postal District Manager Winifred Groux and representatives from the mayor's office and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

A Postal Service news release announced in May that the Civic Center post office would go full service in response to the activists' five-month campaign and 1,000-signature petition. During construction, the release said, general delivery mail service would continue.

The grassroots victory was reminiscent of the TL activists' public transportation success four years ago when Muni tried to change bus service on Geary Street east of Van Ness Avenue. Activists persuaded Muni to retain — instead of eliminating — certain bus stops on the 38-Geary line. But the post office struggle had wider neighborhood participation and the public support of Tenderloin Capt. Gary Jimenez.

Wigdel said the lobby will have no stamp machine: It's too high-maintenance. When retail windows are closed, he suggested buying stamps online, which caused a groan from the audience.

"I know that caused a big groan," Wigdel said. "But we are phasing out the machines nationwide. They are old and we just can't get parts. They are basically obsolete."

Wigdel made it made clear that profitability would rule 101 Hyde's future.

When the audience raised the issue of intimidating drug dealing outside, Wigdel said the sidewalk is the bailiwick of the police, and the post office would hire no security.

The post office had sent postcards to notify citizens in the 94102 and 94103 ZIP codes of the meeting. But half the audience, by a show of hands, said they had not received one. The cards also announced that the Fox Plaza substation at 1390 Market St. and the Federal Building office at 450 Golden Gate Ave. would close.

At the meeting, officials said the post office in the Federal Building basement would stay open and the Fox Plaza office wouldn't close until 2010 when its lease expires. Meantime, USPS Real Estate Specialist Ron Borkgren said he has been looking at alternative sites. The move should be as near Fox Plaza as possible, he said, and within the two TL and SoMa ZIP codes.

Someone in the audience suggested the vacant Merrill's drugstore at Seventh and Market streets, which had served as a postal substation with limited services after the 1989 earthquake closed the Main Post Office at Mission and Seventh. It was a site Borkgren said he hadn't been aware of, and other postal officials showed interest.

But the site on the front burner, Borkgren said, was right across from Fox Plaza at 1355 Market St. ■

Betty Traynor's tireless effort helped cinch the deal for Boeddeker

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year-old national Trust for Public Land is committed to transforming neglected public parks that are accessible to children.

"We looked at 10 different sites and chose ones with existing groups that were involved and interested in doing things," Gilchrist said.

Volunteer Betty Traynor has kept the monthly Friends of Boeddeker meetings running smoothly since the rotating committee chairmanship died two years ago. She avidly pursues and follows up on committee goals and attends weekend volunteer cleanups. Another compelling factor, Gilchrist said, is the 3,000 children in the city's densest neighborhood.

The three parks will divide the \$8 million. Hayes Valley is first in line for improvements next year, then Balboa Park in 2010, followed by Boeddeker in 2011.

Community input for Hayes Valley is well along. A third meeting to discuss the design of the playground and clubhouse at Hayes and Buchanan streets is scheduled for 7 p.m. Aug. 14 at the park.

"The Police Department and the city in general are excited about Boeddeker but there's an absence of community process in it now," Gilchrist said. "We won't be thinking about designing until early 2010

when the community meetings will start. And we will continue coming to Friends of Boeddeker Park meetings."

When Gilchrist began attending Friends' meetings at the clubhouse two years ago, he said he was sizing up parks and looking for major project ideas to fund at an unspecified future date.

Boeddeker's current configuration came about in the mid-1980s. The 2.5-acre plot had been created in 1978 as Central City Park to provide the TL some green space. It supplanted Downtown Bowl. After a \$3 million face-lift, it was renamed in March 1985 to honor Father Alfred Boeddeker, the Franciscan priest who founded St. Anthony Dining Room two blocks away. Other renovations, including a new children's playground and remodeled recreation center, came in the 1990s. The Rotary Club also put \$200,000 into access ramps, new fencing, a small lawn and a tots play area.

Located in the middle of the city's poorest neighborhood, Boeddeker took on endemic problems as a harbor for drunks, addicts and dope dealers. It grew notorious. For years, scores of volunteers trying to clean and beautify the park have appealed for more police patrols. Sometimes cops have effectively reduced problems, sometimes not.

But a project last year, spawned by the trust, got people thinking critically about the park's design. Its spiky, 6-foot-high fence and massive iron gate make Boeddeker look like a fortress, and its grounds are inefficiently planned, critics say.

Gilchrist's Boeddeker Park reports to the trust's board and volunteers in 2007 had immediately fascinated some architects. They wanted to do a comprehensive redesign. A dozen of them from local firms and 15 other volunteers ended up contributing \$25,000 in pro bono work.

The design, among other changes, put a lawn in the middle of the park with a circular promenade around it, created a second, smaller community house by the north gate, added a slim two-story building on Eddy Street near the community building's front door to house a little cafe with its upper wall — facing the lawn — functioning as a movie screen.

There was no cost estimate; it was a fantasy exercise. But residents and others who saw the design at Friends' and Collaborative meetings were surprised that Boeddeker could be something other than what it is, and some criticized aspects of the plan.

"It (the redesign) will be considered minimally, if at all," Gilchrist said. "It has never been our intention that it would be a starting point, and it's not

the basis of a design. But there are lessons to learn from it."

One observation was that people inside the community building can't look out and see what's going on in the park, suggesting need for a second story.

"A lot of ideas are valid," Gilchrist said. "But we're not going to impose our ideas."

What struck the architects about Boeddeker continues to intrigue other outsiders.

"Each park is different," Gilchrist said, "but there's a lot of interest in making Boeddeker an exciting place. It's such a contrast. It's just two blocks from the cable car turnaround on Market Street where tourists are, and it's a totally different world. And that's compelling to people."

At the July Friends of Boeddeker meeting, Steve Cismowski, Rec and park's regional neighborhood liaison, said his department has to determine the park's needs.

"The community doesn't always have operational needs at heart," he said, "and we have to approach it from that angle."

With so many competing perspectives and such a complex makeover, it will be a test for the community to see if people can agree on how to revise the park to meet the needs of the Tenderloin tomorrow. ■



This is a rendering of the Boeddeker Park of the future as envisioned by a dozen architects who found the park so appealing that they must have had a ball with this design.