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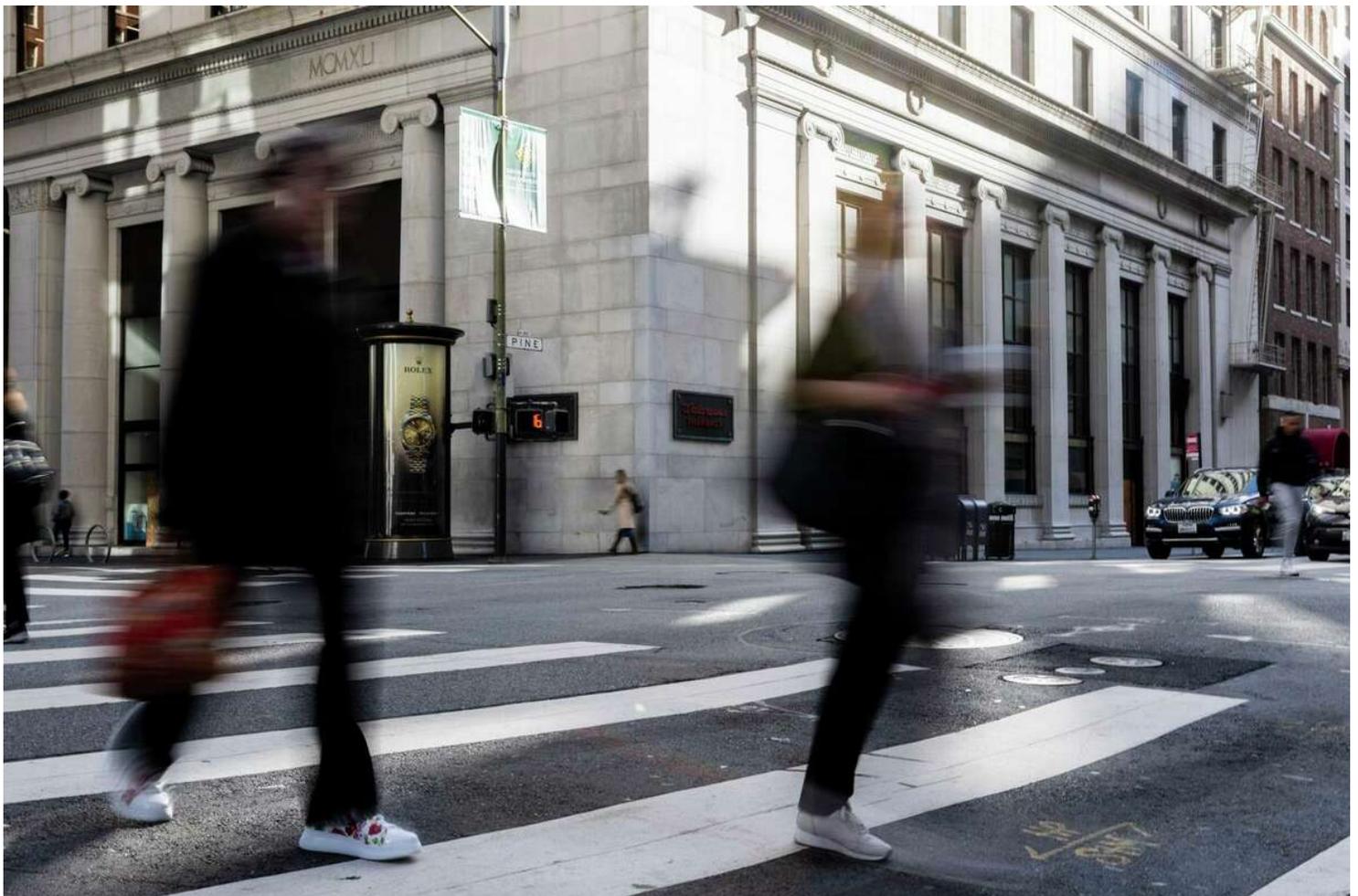
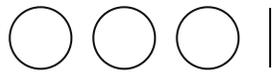
BAY AREA // SAN FRANCISCO

Here's how a downtown S.F. group is using data to reimagine the area as more than 'banks and people walking around in suits'



Chase DiFeliciano

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People cross the intersection of Montgomery and Pine streets in San Francisco. Downtown SF and the Union Square Alliance use sensor technology to track the recovery of commuters and shoppers in the area.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Parts of downtown San Francisco may never be the same.

The area roughly bounded by Kearny and Market streets, Pacific Avenue and the Embarcadero is no longer the boarded-up ghost town from the darkest days of the pandemic, when shelter-in-place orders and remote work emptied the city's economic heart. But the rivers of people that used to stream through the narrow, windy streets of the Financial District have not yet come back in full force.

While some employees are starting to return to offices a few days a week, there are still vastly fewer people hopping trains and buses to head downtown for work. That means less money spent on lunches and after-work drinks, and less tax revenue for the city. But while some long for a return to the busy pathways and full offices of the past, others are realizing the area may have to evolve into more of a neighborhood to survive and thrive.

Which is why downtown booster groups want the district to draw crowds as an events and dining destination, instead of relying on crammed trains of commuters pumping money into the area like in years past. That is partly why San Francisco business districts are using technology — like collecting cell phone location data to analyze movement trends or street-level sensors that register human outlines and count each person that strolls by — to closely watch how many people are returning to the downtown area, and when.



Commuters exit a BART train at Embarcadero Station in San Francisco. Downtown SF and the Union Square Alliance use sensor technology to track the recovery of commuters and shoppers in the area.
Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

“We can’t be known as just the Financial District anymore,” said Robbie Silver, the executive director of Downtown SF, the nonprofit community benefit district funded by voluntary assessments on property owners that covers the roughly 43 blocks of the Financial District and Jackson Square.

Silver said as more people return, getting away from the image of a downtown where “all we have are banks and people walking around in suits” is crucial to the area’s long-term recovery, and to avoid a return to the pandemic days that saw the area emptied out and seemingly abandoned.

One event from last year called “Let’s Glow SF” saw local artists project light displays onto the area’s historic buildings. Silver said it drew about 40,000 people,

including many families, to the downtown core despite the pandemic, and at a time when the area would otherwise be mostly empty.

Part of how Silver's group knew how many people were at the event and are going downtown these days is through data collected by sensors placed throughout the district, made by a company called Springboard, that count how many people are walking by, and by Placer Labs, which uses anonymized cell phone location data it gets from third-party apps to estimate the movements of large numbers of people over time.

Pedestrians counted in Financial District weekly between September 2021 and March 2022

Data from four sensors on Montgomery, Market, California and Bush streets



Source: SF Community Benefit District via Springboard

Each date represents a week of data beginning on that day.

The four Springboard sensors on and around Montgomery Street between California and Market streets found pedestrians in the areas where they are set up nearly doubled from about 46,000 during the first week of the year to more than 88,000 during the second to last week of March.

That is a shift from the slightly more than 36,000 people the sensors counted during the first full week in September 2021, shortly after they were first installed.

The Placer Labs location data showed that more than 39,000 people visited San Francisco’s downtown from Jan. 1 to March 15. That’s up from about 23,000 during the same period last year but still far below the more than 100,000 people who showed up in that period in early 2020, right before pandemic lockdowns took hold.

The Placer data also looks at how long a particular cell phone spent in the area on average, called “dwell time.” That metric ticked up for people going downtown to nearly seven hours during the first six weeks of 2022 compared with last year, indicating people are not just headed downtown but staying there for most of the workday.

Visits to S.F. Downtown

Visits, visitors and frequency estimated by Placer.ai from Jan. 1 to March 15 each year

	Visits	Visitors	Visit frequency
2020	3,200,000	101,100	32
2021	366,900	23,100	16
2022	797,800	31,100	20

Table: Chase DiFelicianantonio • Source: SF Downtown Community Benefit District via Placer Labs

The numbers are estimates and not exact counts, said Ethan Chernofsky, the company’s vice president of marketing. The company receives anonymized cell phone location data from other apps that people have agreed to share their location data with, and uses an algorithm to draw insights about people’s locations in a given area.

All those data points help Silver see when people are in the area and where, to help inform the search for ways to keep them coming and sticking around for a meal or event.

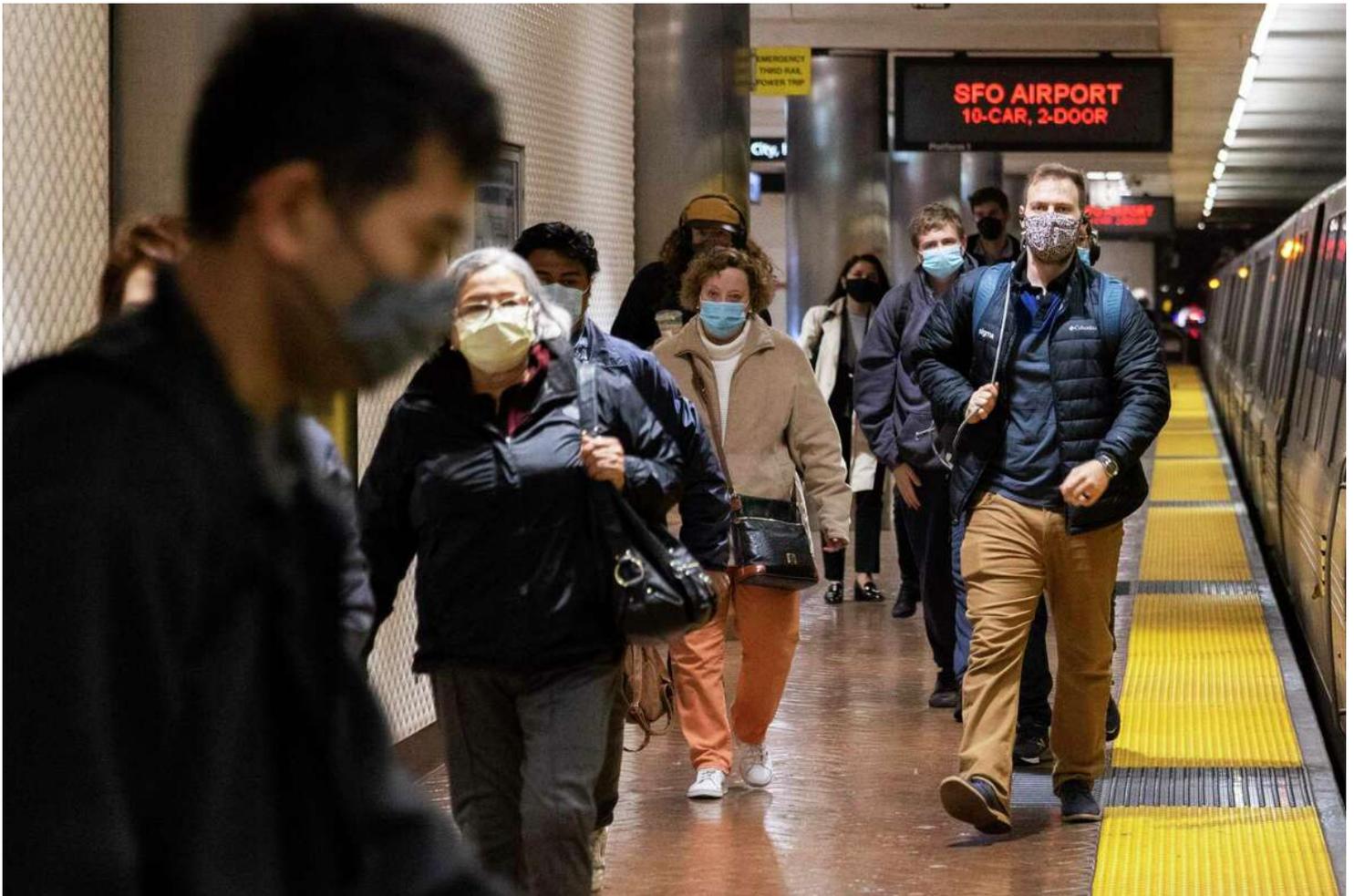
Silver said a poll run by Downtown SF that reached more than 830 people showed cultural events and more food and beverage options topping respondents' downtown wish lists.

Downtown SF has also hired Sitelab Urban Studio, a strategic design firm, to develop a plan to build the area into more of a neighborhood and not just a business district. "Our North Star is to become a 24-hour neighborhood," Silver said. Sitelab's plan is scheduled to be released at the end of June and will focus in part on the revitalization of public spaces.

But the obstacles to realizing that vision were partly outlined in a [report](#) released Thursday, which showed city economists expect about a third of workers to telecommute long-term, more than double the 15% projected in a previous five-year plan.

That is likely to hurt the city's business tax revenue by about \$64.6 million, or 7%, in fiscal 2022-23, because where people are physically working can determine how much tax their companies pay to the city. Fewer people heading into commercial districts could also mean less sales tax revenue, the report found.

Silver said the community benefit district also looks at other statistics like transit data and office swipe-ins reported to the city to get a sense of how close to a pre-pandemic "normal" the area is.



Commuters exit a BART train at Montgomery Street Station in San Francisco. Downtown SF and the Union Square Alliance use sensor technology to track the recovery of commuters and shoppers in the area.
Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

The latest report from the city Controller's Office showed that while BART exits at downtown San Francisco stations increased from January to February, they were still only about 20% of February 2019 levels.

Office entrance data from Kastle Systems also showed attendance rebounding in the San Francisco metro area as the omicron surge abated earlier this year, but the city was still behind other areas such as Los Angeles, New York and San Jose. The San Francisco area is still only seeing about a third of people showing up to offices each week compared with before the pandemic, although that number is trending up. The San Jose metro is seeing a similar trend, while Los Angeles is closer to 40%.

Those numbers partly reflect the city pushing hard to get many of the area's largest employers on board with a return to in-person work. Google and Uber are among the companies going along with Mayor London Breed's plan to bring workers back, which goes a long way to persuading others to do the same, said Alex Kaplan, a Downtown SF board member who works at real estate investment firm Tidewater Capital.

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“Messaging is really critical,” Kaplan said. “It sets the right tone that San Francisco is coming back.”

The Financial District is not the only area of the city whose boosters are watching, and monitoring, the crowds as they trickle back.

The Union Square Alliance, formerly the Union Square Business Improvement District, uses Springboard software installed in seven of the more than 450 cameras that surveil the roughly 27-block neighborhood, said Stacy Jed, the group's director of marketing and events. That is up from about 350 cameras in 2018.

Those sensors use technology to determine a human outline and count people as they enter and exit the area, but don't use facial recognition technology, Jed said.

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In an email, she said the sensors are installed along Powell, Market and Stockton streets and Grant Avenue, but declined to say where exactly they are located, saying only, "It is not in the public's best interest for us to disclose this."

Those sensors counted close to 164,000 pedestrians moving through the area during the week of March 21, about double the same period the previous year and more than four times that same week during March 2020 when pandemic shelter-in-place orders had just taken effect.

Back downtown, Silver said he hopes to use all the data his group is collecting and to combine it with other sources like transit ridership into an online dashboard to help businesses understand where and when people are heading downtown.

“If I’m a restaurant and I’m hearing good news about people coming back to work, I want to have a one-stop shop for all of that data,” Silver said, alluding to one example of how the data could help businesses and event planners adapt to a changed downtown.

Even without that information at his fingertips yet, the Placer Labs data are already showing other trends, including the days of the week — Tuesdays, Wednesday and Thursdays — when people are more likely to visit downtown.

“We’re finding (people) are coming back for full work days,” during the middle of the week, Silver said, although the data still show far fewer visits compared with the same period during the first six weeks of 2020.

But compared with the darkest days of the pandemic when people wondered whether offices might be gone for good and the fortunes of places like downtown with them, data showing more people heading to work midweek gives Silver a sliver of hope. “Monday and Friday aren’t far behind,” he said.

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