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SPOTLIGHT

## Mayor wants downtown streets to become entertainment hubs

By Patrick Hoge | Examiner staff writer |  
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Duncan Ley, co-owner of Harrington's Bar & Grill: "It's a reconfiguration and reimagining of what public space can be in a major metropolitan area. It's on us to execute."

Craig Lee/The Examiner

It was fortuitous that after four years of dormancy, Harrington's Bar & Grill reopened in March just in time to serve the crowds of revelers for the annual St. Patrick's Day celebration that closes Front Street in downtown San Francisco.

Duncan Ley, one of Harrington's new owners, said he hopes there will be many more block parties in the future as a result of legislation Mayor London Breed plans to introduce that would designate Front Street between California and Sacramento streets as the state's first "entertainment zone," a label meant particularly to let bars and restaurants sell alcohol during outdoor events.

"We think it's a huge opportunity to bring more people downtown," Ley said. "To me, it's a reconfiguration and reimagining of what public space can be in a major metropolitan area. It's on us to execute on what the potential is."

Breed separately announced Friday a \$500,000 initiative to provide grants of up to \$50,000 to support activities, events and campaigns to attract people to the greater downtown area in an effort to boost the area's sluggish post-pandemic recovery. Huge numbers of workers have stopped regularly commuting downtown and instead work remotely.

The grant program, administered by the city's Office of Economic and Workforce Development and the nonprofit SF New Deal, opened today for applications, which will be accepted on a rolling basis. Priority will be given to submissions received before June 15 that involve multiple existing businesses.

In addition to Front Street, Breed's entertainment-zone legislation would establish a framework for designating future blocks for outdoor fun, aligning with her campaign to develop downtown's arts, entertainment and nightlife sectors as a way to bolster businesses and diversify the area's economy.

"Our message is clear: San Francisco is having fun, thriving and open for business," Breed said.

The entertainment-zone designation is made possible by state Sen. Scott Wiener's SB 76, a law passed last year that specifically enabled San Francisco as a pilot case to authorize entertainment zones within limits. This year, Wiener introduced SB 969, which would allow entertainment zones statewide and expand the periods in which they can operate.

"Activating our streets with fun, community events is a powerful tool to accelerate downtown recovery," Wiener said.

The Downtown SF Partnership, working with urban-design studio SITELAB, sketched out a vision for a Front Street in 2022 as part of a public realm action plan it produced for 43 blocks of downtown.

“It’s very exciting,” said Robbie Silver, executive director of the partnership, a local business-supported community improvement district. Silver said he now wants to raise money to beautify Front Street and hopes the entertainment zone will encourage businesses to occupy vacant spaces on the block.



Harrington’s Bar & Grill at 245 Front Street in San Francisco on Thursday, May 2, 2024.

Craig Lee/The Examiner

The vision is for Harrington’s and two other venerable Front Street bars and restaurants — the Royal Exchange and Schroeder’s — to create a place known for outdoor eating, drinking and other varied amusements including music performances and art shows.

“We desperately need creative help, new thinking, new ideas,” said Andy Chun, an owner of Schroeder’s, a historic German bar and restaurant. “There is no single magic bullet that will solve all of this problem, but this is a start.”

“Downtown has been a difficult place to own a business since the pandemic,” he said. “People have not come back to work in the same way.”

Chun said he would like to close Front Street from midmorning until night every day of the week with attractions such as holiday markets, watch parties for sporting events, music performances and art shows.

Last week, Breed also introduced legislation to waive city fees for certain outdoor events ranging from block parties to farmers' markets that are free and open to the public on three or fewer blocks for a maximum of 12 events in one calendar year.

Chun said he hopes that the new rules will lower the high costs of permitting and inspections associated with the street's annual St. Patrick's Day and Oktoberfest block parties.

"What we'd like to be able to do is create a sense of permanence," Chun said.

Last month, in line with her emphasis on arts and culture, Breed also announced a new series of outdoor concerts running at various locations through November. The City also financially contributed to the Bhangra & Beats Night Market series that starts May 10.

Mike O'Brien, owner of Royal Exchange, where business has been slow to bounce back, said he's ready for the momentum to change.

"We're trying to stay positive down here and hope things go back to normal, but they're far from normal right now," O'Brien said, expressing optimism about the potential for an entertainment zone.

"It's hopefully going to be a shot in the arm, because we need it," he said.

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**Patrick Hoge**

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