

BUSINESS

'Nothing Is Off the Table': City Leaders Mull What To Do With SF's Empty Downtown

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An aerial map is displayed behind Robbie Silver (center) and Laura Crescimano (right) during a panel discussion about the future of Downtown at the Commonwealth Club. | Benjamin Fanjoy/The Standard

Downtown San Francisco needs a serious reboot, city leaders say.

They had hoped that by this point, more than two years into the pandemic, Downtown SF would be back and bustling. Instead, SF's core has lost around 300,000 visitors per day since 2019, said Wade Rose, president of Advance SF.

At a Commonwealth Club panel hosted by The Standard's reporter Kevin Truong on Tuesday, Nov. 1, local business and public leaders honed in on public safety and potential business incentives to shore up Downtown, which remains markedly empty compared with the downtowns of other U.S. cities.

"Nothing is off the table right now," said Kate Sofis, executive director of the city's Office of Economic and Workforce Development. "This is a pivotal moment where we need to fight for every individual business to stay and come here."



Kate Sofis (center) speaks during a panel discussion about the future of Downtown San Francisco. | Benjamin Fanjoy/The Standard

Earlier this month, Mayor London Breed acknowledged for the first time that remote work is here to stay—a reality with potentially serious implications for the city’s bottom line. City leaders are scrambling to gauge the impact of empty office buildings on the city’s budget and offering up solutions, such as a revamp of the city’s notoriously complex tax code.

One strategy already in the works is park and alleyway improvements to bring more life and color Downtown, said Robbie Silver, executive director of the San Francisco Downtown Community Benefit District, and Laura Crescimano, cofounder of Sitelab.

They pointed to recent pilots like adding public art and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure to shared streets, and to Let’s Glow SF, a program Silver’s group led to light up city buildings during the holidays. The latter resulted in a \$2.2 million economic impact by bringing people Downtown to shop in the evening, Silver said.

“It helps [employers] convince employees to come back, because there is something to come to,” Rose said.



Panelists discuss the future of Downtown San Francisco at the Commonwealth Club. The event was moderated by San Francisco Standard reporter Kevin Truong (far left). | Benjamin Fanjoy/The Standard

One idea that's gained steam among some locals is converting Downtown offices into housing, which other cities like Los Angeles and New York have begun to pursue, but which San Francisco has yet to explore with urgency.

But Sofis said she doesn't agree that San Francisco's downtown core is best suited for housing, saying that could crowd out activities like nightlife and a more diverse mix of commercial uses for Downtown—and pointed to housing building booms in adjacent neighborhoods like SoMa, which other cities would consider part of their downtowns since San Francisco's is so small.



Robbie Silver speaks during a panel discussion about the future of Downtown at the Commonwealth Club. | Benjamin Fanjoy/The Standard

“I would push back a bit on the notion that the highest and best use of many of our office buildings is conversion to residential,” Sofis said.

Sofis also called to prioritize hiring for the San Francisco Police Department, adding more street ambassadors and centralizing help for people who need it. Even after Breed announced a new fleet of community ambassadors Downtown, there simply aren’t not enough police Downtown for people to feel safe visiting or coming to work or at night, Rose said.

“We’re not going to be able to get at the good stuff until this issue is managed,” he said.

None of them, including Crescimano, is giving up on Downtown. When asking residents, her group found that Covid isn’t what was keeping them out: Most put the end of the pandemic at the bottom of the list for what would get

them back to Downtown, which means there's still a lot of work to be done.

“All roads lead to Downtown,” Crescimano said.

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