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Viewpoint: Don't count downtown San Francisco out yet



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San Francisco is dealing with significant changes to the fabric of its downtown. In the wake of recent unsettling announcements, we think it's the right time to remind everyone that there are many reasons to be optimistic about San Francisco's future and downtown's economic recovery.

Recent pieces of legislation, new street festivals and fairs, a record-setting first quarter for corporate and early-stage funding with big deals for OpenAI and Stripe, and hundreds of applications for "[Vacant to Vibrant](#)," a new program that utilizes small businesses to activate empty storefronts, demonstrate progress. The transformation of downtown is happening right in front of our eyes, and we need to take this opportunity to turn it into a diverse neighborhood operating beyond the 9-5, five-day-a-week model.

Since early 2022, [The Make Your Future SF Coalition](#) has worked with the mayor's office, the Board of Supervisors and the Office of Economic and Workforce Development. As a group representing small and large businesses, hospitality, tourism, restaurants, housing, and planning organizations, our goal is to build a consensus around [the city's roadmap](#) for a vibrant and safe downtown and advocate for the resources and legislative fixes needed to fully deploy it.

We applaud Mayor London Breed and Board President Aaron Peskin for spearheading the efforts to find solutions and new ideas. Their partnership has culminated in a [joint proposal that unanimously passed through the Board of Supervisors](#), which relaxes zoning restrictions to help rejuvenate Union Square and facilitate downtown office-to-housing conversions.

Mayor Breed's budget proposal addresses public safety, activations, and tax changes that would help bring downtown back to life. It doubles down on renewing an area responsible for 80% of the city's economy, 70% of local jobs, and more than half of its tax revenue. The budget shows that the roadmap laid out in February can begin to realize downtown's potential future, but we must stay the course to see these ideas through to actual legislation and changes in how the city is administered.

All ideas should be on the table, especially those that make living and doing business in the city more affordable. That means bold action around tax abatement to reignite stalled housing and conversions. It includes incentives that will attract and retain companies, support existing and new small businesses and help development projects pencil out. Lowering the costs of changing the use of buildings or starting a new business sends an important message that the city is prepared to reimagine itself.

We must push initiatives to lift San Francisco's arts community and ensure that artists benefit from downtown revitalization. That means adding more opportunities for artists and performers, such as in the [free concerts proposed by Another Planet Entertainment](#), and designating Arts, Culture, and Entertainment (ACE) Zones. It means streamlining the process for festivals and street fairs, which we've already seen successfully bring thousands of people downtown in the [Bhangra & Beats Night Market](#), [Let's Glow SF](#), and the [Yerba Buena Art and Makers Market](#).

Our group continues to discuss solutions with city leaders, including action on crime and safety issues, many of which are now part of the mayor's budget. We are confident San Francisco can restore its heart – the place that economically drives its housing development, restaurants, retail, arts, construction and social services such as affordable housing, street maintenance, parks and schools – into something more vibrant, diverse, and resilient. We need everyone's help to turn the ideas into reality.

Wade Rose is president of Advance SF and wrote this essay on behalf of The Make Your Future SF Coalition: Advance SF; Bay Area Council; BOMA San Francisco; Downtown SF Partnership; Golden Gate Restaurant Association; Hotel Council of San Francisco; San Francisco Chamber of Commerce; San Francisco Travel Association; SPUR; and the Union Square Alliance.