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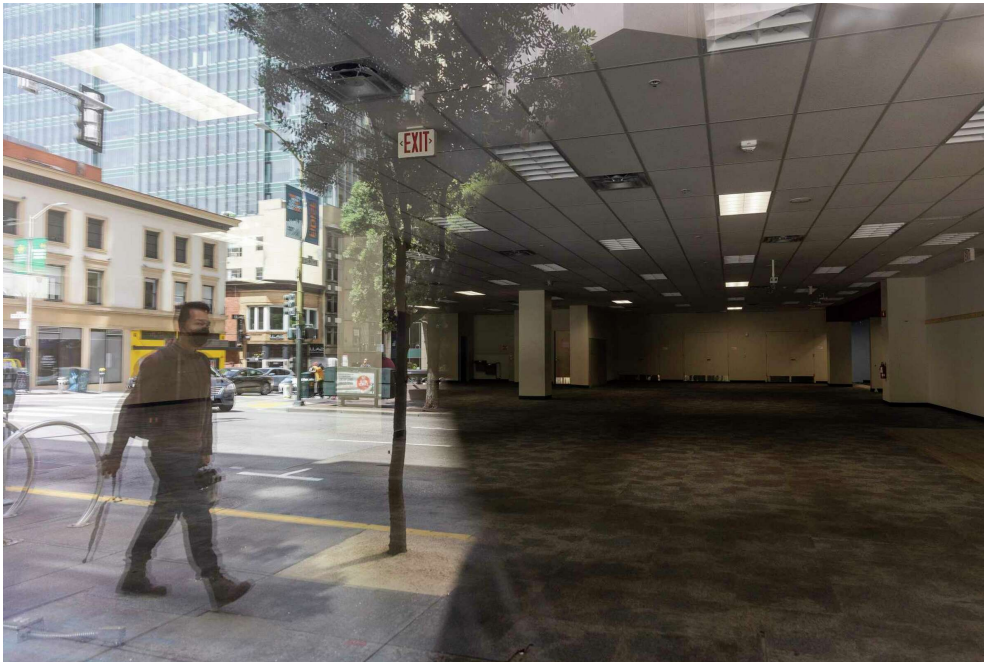
'Pop-up' businesses could soon breathe life into downtown S.F.



Noah Arroyo

April 17, 2023

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Pedestrians walk past a shuttered Walgreens along Kearny Street in San Francisco's Financial District.
Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

With half-empty office buildings and vacant storefronts dotting downtown San Francisco as it continues to struggle with post-pandemic recovery, it can be hard to envision a future for the area as once again thriving and full of people.

But a city program launching this week hopes to jump-start urban activity by connecting willing landlords with cultural organizations, small businesses, bars and eateries who would use the vacant spaces for temporary, "pop-up" installations.

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“People will be able to imagine downtown as a nightlife and entertainment hub because they’ll be experiencing it,” said Jacob Bindman, chief programs officer for SF New Deal, a nonprofit managing the effort. Businesses and organizations applying to the program will pitch ideas for how they’ll draw visitors, and those proposals will be matched with building owners interested in having their empty spaces utilized.

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“We want there to be a lot of wild ideas, like a dance party on Market Street,” Bindman said.

Called Vacant to Vibrant, a component of Mayor London Breed's downtown recovery plan, the program will place pop-ups in pockets of the city’s moribund northeast to attract visitors and build public interest in how the area could change. Officials recognize that, with remote work here to stay, the economic survival of the business district and the city overall relies on downtown becoming more than an office enclave.

On Monday, the [application portal](#) opened for pop-up aspirants, as well as for downtown property owners who want to offer their suites. Selected pop-ups will each receive grants of up to \$8,000 and help getting necessary permits, which the program will pay for. Participating property owners will receive about \$5,000 per commercial unit to cover utilities and other expenses. The program is funded with \$710,000 from the San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development.

Currently there are 33 vacant ground floor commercial spaces in the part of downtown containing the Financial District, according to nonprofit Downtown SF Partnership, which provides cleaning, beautification and other services there. Vacant to Vibrant will occur in three rounds over the next year, with each round lasting two to three months and featuring about a dozen pop-ups. The first round should start late summer, Bindman said.

Change can't come soon enough. The downtown area is San Francisco's economic engine, and is reeling from new shocks that have deepened fears of a ["doom loop" scenario](#) — a self-reinforcing cycle in which degrading conditions erode tax revenue for City Hall, further worsening life in the city and causing residents and businesses to leave. A Whole Foods near the Civic Center BART station abruptly [closed last week](#) due to concerns about crime and worker safety, dashing hopes that it would attract other businesses and new residents to the area. And Salesforce, the city's largest private employer, is the latest company to announce it will [vacate downtown](#), as San Francisco generally leads major cities in office vacancy.

When the pop-ups are up and running, a visitor might come downtown for lunch at a restaurant and, following dessert, linger at a nearby art gallery. They may invite their friends to join them when an outdoor DJ starts playing music. After dancing, the group could tie off the evening at a bespoke bar around the corner. The program could also spur more employees to work in their offices.

Eva Morris, owner and chef of the Cajun and Creole restaurant formerly called Voodoo Love, is interested in applying for a slot. She closed her brick-and-mortar location when the pandemic struck and now makes brief appearances to sell her food at bars and other businesses, calling herself Voodoo Child.

Getting a downtown pop-up would bring steadier business "in a proper space where people could walk up, and I feel like people are craving that," Morris said. "People want to hang out, see the chef."

Meanwhile, real estate agent Danny Yadegar is trying to help artists sell art or even work out of vacant retail spaces, and sees an opportunity in Vacant to Vibrant. Downtown's commercial suites are big enough that they might host multiple artists who could get inventive with the space.

"How do we pair these galleries with other uses, like a yoga studio or a dance studio?" Yadegar said, adding that live events might happen too.

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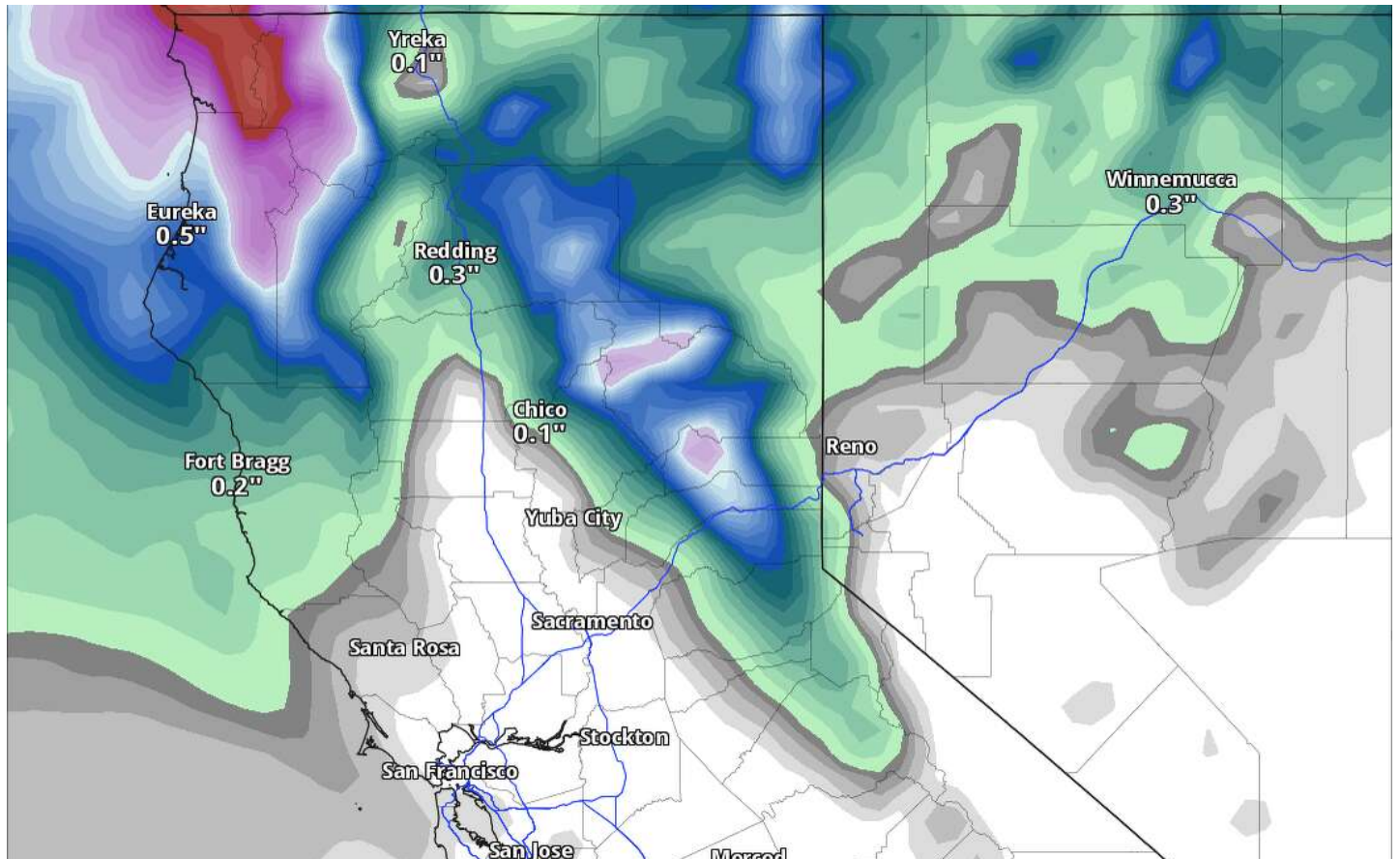
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Reach Noah on

Noah Arroyo is a reporter examining the future of San Francisco. Before The Chronicle, he worked at Mission Local and the San Francisco Public Press and focused on the city's housing and homelessness crises — possibly two sides of the same coin. Noah takes a data-driven approach when possible and seeks out the sources who don't generally get quoted.

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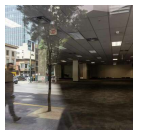
New cold front heads to Bay Area. Here's how chilly it will be

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BY ANTHONY EDWARDS

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