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FEATURED

San Francisco is cleaning up its act

By Adam Shanks | Examiner staff writer |
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Sutter Street near Sansome Street in downtown San Francisco. Downtown streets are cleaner than they were as recently as six years ago, according to data.

Craig Lee/The Examiner

To put it politely, San Francisco isn't exactly known for its shimmeringly clean streets.

But new data compiled by the Downtown SF Partnership indicates downtown San Francisco might be sprucing up a bit over the first half of 2022, even though foot traffic has only modestly increased and the COVID-19 pandemic has become a fleeting concern for many.

The Downtown SF Partnership tracks the issues that employees of its service provider, Streetplus, run into while deployed to streets in the Financial District and Jackson Square.

From January to July, it reported declines of 25% in trash and litter, a 76% reduction in hazardous waste, a 91% reduction in graffiti and a 41% reduction in quality-of-life incidents like aggressive panhandling.

Those improvements come despite an uptick in the number of people visiting downtown in recent months.

It's a trend downtown boosters are obviously eager to share, as they look to lure businesses and workers back to office buildings ahead of impending financial troubles.

Alex Bastian, president and CEO of the Hotel Council of San Francisco, credits The City for making improvements in cleanliness and safety since the beginning of the year.

"On both of these issues, the momentum is in the right direction," Bastian said.

Bastian is heartened by signs that more Bay Area employers are looking to bring employees back to work, including Apple.

"It impacts business travel. People come to San Francisco on business trips in order to meet with people," Bastian explained.

Obviously, not everyone is satisfied with The City's progress, and the ravages of its opioid epidemic and persistent struggles with homelessness are broadcast widely.

Joe D'Alessandro, the president and CEO of SF Travel, pointed to the conditions on city streets as an impediment to drawing conventions to San Francisco in an interview with ABC7 on Tuesday.

"A lot of visitors are concerned, concerned for their own safety," he said. "They don't know where to walk."

Others might argue that the improvements downtown have come at the expense of other neighborhoods. The Castro Merchants Association warned earlier this month that its members could refuse to pay city taxes and fees if issues like homelessness in the neighborhood were not addressed.

There's no clear-cut way to explain the slightly spiffed-up downtown documented by the downtown SF Partnership, the reasons for which are probably multifaceted.

Robbie Silver, executive director of the Downtown SF Partnership, credited the improvement in part to its "proactive cleaning" efforts. The Downtown SF Partnership is the organization that administers the downtown community benefit district, which raises taxes on itself to fund projects that benefit the neighborhoods it covers.

"Our rule is to tackle graffiti within 24 hours; however, we remove graffiti tags as quickly as they are reported. This has caused tags to be displayed for less amount of time and decreases the likelihood of (them) coming back," Silver said.

The numbers also indicate that as people return to work in person and tourists visit downtown, there are fewer opportunities for inconspicuous tagging of a building or littering. The Downtown SF Partnership is building a post-pandemic recovery plan based on bringing more people downtown for all kinds of reasons, not just work, and hopes to see cascading benefits from courtyard concerts and alleys full of dining tables.

"When a space or downtown is more populated and activated, there's less blight," Silver said.

The data reflects incidents resolved by Downtown SF Partnership's ambassadors, so it doesn't capture issues taken care of by city employees or the police. (Crime tracked by San Francisco police in the Central District, which includes the Financial District, increased by 3.3% in the first seven months of 2022 compared with the same timeframe in 2021.)

Downtown SF Partnership separately hosts a data dashboard with information about the economic recovery in downtown San Francisco.

This year has hardly matched the hustle and bustle of pre-pandemic San Francisco, but it's still a marked improvement over the nadir of 2020. According to data, about 123,000 employees traveled downtown the week of Aug. 22. That's barely more than one-third of the number during the week in 2019, but nearly three times as the same point in 2020.

Still, significant structural issues remain in the downtown economy, as many companies with expansive offices there have shifted to remote or hybrid work — or left San Francisco altogether.

According to research firm CBRE, the north Financial District (which sits above Market Street) had an office vacancy rate of 23% in the second quarter of 2022, roughly on par with the citywide vacancy rate of 24%. For comparison, the office vacancy rate was below 5% before the start of the pandemic.

Ted Egan, The City's chief economist, predicted in a June report that the north Financial District could see office vacancy rates as high as 41% as it emerges from the pandemic. Jackson Square, just to its north, has an office vacancy risk of 54%, according to the report.

In the same report, data indicate that work-from-home policies have stabilized over the last year. Many employees are working roughly the same amount of days from home per week and employers are slowly giving up on forcing them back.

As such, many economists are predicting a collapse in property values. Some property owners have already begun to ask for reassessments from The City, which could in turn blow a sizable hole in The City's tax revenues.

But there are encouraging signs.

According to data tracked by office security company Kastle Systems, San Francisco has edged ahead of San Jose and New York City in weekly office attendance.

And as more people come downtown, leaders like Silver hope they'll see increasingly clean streets.

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