



Commercial Real Estate

How does downtown S.F. rebound? This 29-year-old has some ideas.



Image: Robbie Silver

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Robbie Silver, 29, last week became the permanent executive director of the San Francisco Downtown Community Benefit District, which was formed in January 2020. One of his goals is combatting the perception that downtown San Francisco is "just a bunch of office buildings."

ROBBIE SILVER

IN THIS ARTICLE

- **Retailing-** Industry
- **Economic Incentives-** Topic
- **Coronavirus-** Topic
- **Robbie Silver-** Person



By [Alex Barreira](#) – Staff Reporter, San Francisco Business Times
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The Downtown Community Business District, the organization responsible for marketing and cleaning up downtown San Francisco, wants to beautify parts of the Financial District and Jackson Square.

The organization issued a request for proposals Tuesday seeking a landscape architect or urban design firm to develop a plan. The CBD's board approved an extra \$1.1 million dedicated to beautification projects in its fiscal 2021-22 budget Monday; and funds to develop a three-year strategic plan were also approved.

The effort comes as the organization's 43-block zone, hit hard by office closures related to the pandemic, tries to stage a comeback as the Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.

"We're trying to bring back life and establish public spaces, creating mini-destinations within our district," said [Robbie Silver](#), who was named the organization's executive director last week after serving in an interim capacity since March.

He's hoping that eventually the investments will make the area more active at all hours, rebranding downtown as more than "a bunch of office buildings" and a making it more than a 9-to-5 destination.

The [Downtown CBD](#), one of 17 such organizations in San Francisco, is funded by a special assessment levied on property owners in the neighborhood. The CBD generates nearly \$4 million in assessment revenue annually and had assets at the end of 2020 of [\\$5.4 million](#).

The CBD was officially created in January 2020, just months before the pandemic turned downtown into one of the city's most noticeably desolate neighborhoods. The closure of offices in the work-from-home era has hurt restaurants and retail, leading to many storefront vacancies and small businesses struggling to make ends meet.

"It would be great to have incubator space for women-owned or Black-owned businesses," Silver said, remarking on restaurant spaces in the neighborhood vacated during the pandemic. "But those are long-term. We're not sure how to get there yet."

In the short term, the organization is working with local artists to install a 1,900-square-foot mural on Battery Street (near the intersection of Battery, Bush and Market Streets) painted with a special epoxy directly onto the asphalt, and throughout the neighborhood

adding seating and plantings to make public areas more appealing for people to congregate. He also wants to create a "digital art block" that project art installations onto buildings at night. He's considering additional signage and lighting to promote the businesses at Belden Place, a restaurant-lined alleyway that fills up with foot traffic during holidays.

Silver joined the CBD as deputy director in September before becoming interim executive director in March, replacing founding executive director John Bozeman. At 29 years old — Silver turns 30 on July 4 — he's one of the [International Downtown Association](#)'s youngest members.

In December, the CBD contracted with Streetplus, a New York-based company with a San Francisco outpost, to provide cleaning services (removing graffiti, clearing litter) and social services (providing "passive" safety for pedestrians and coordinating with other city agencies to direct resources to those in need.) You can spot them in their district-branded navy uniforms or zipping around on bikes and scooters on a daily basis between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.

For additional safety enforcement, the CBD in April contracted two off-duty police officers for 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 1 p.m. to 7 p.m. daily shifts, like other districts utilizing the city's 10-B program that makes officers available at 1.5 times their hourly pay.

A street banner campaign throughout the CBD begun last year emphasized the messaging of a multi-faceted FiDi ("live-work-play-discover"). Now there's a Pride and Downtown CBD-branded banner flying on 80 poles. Beautification efforts included commissioning local artists to paint murals over boarded-up storefronts.

Long-term, Silver wants to see more developments like [530 Sansome St.](#), a proposed mixed-use project that aims to remodel a downtown fire station and incorporates office and retail space below either a 200-room hotel or the same number of residential apartment units. That project is still going through planning approvals and doesn't expect to break ground until 2022. Eventually, Silver said, more people living in the area will improve support for restaurants and retail as well as the outlook for public safety.

For now, he acknowledged the corridor's businesses are seriously starved without the commuter crowds, saying said the area needs Muni and BART to return to their pre-pandemic schedules.

"The biggest need by far is the population, the bodies," Silver said. "We've seen over the last few weeks an increase in the day-to-day population and people coming back to work, but it needs to happen quicker."

He added, "For a tech company, or another major employer, to say 'work from home for forever' I think is a dangerous message to cities and downtowns across the country."

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