

BUSINESS

# San Francisco's Downtown Looks To Revamp Its Image This Holiday Season

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Published Nov. 23, 2022 • 5:00am



San Francisco Mayor London Breed (center left) and other City official including SFPD Police Chief Bill Scott (center right) and District Attorney Brooke Jenkins (far right) during a press conference at Union Square ahead of the 2022 shopping season on Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2022 in San Francisco, Calif. | Paul Kuroda for The Standard

Earlier this month, Mayor London Breed anointed the beginning of holiday shopping season with a joke about all the questions her office received about the earlier-than-usual Macy's tree lighting this year.

“This is to all the folks who reached out and asked: ‘Why are we lighting up the tree, and we haven’t even had Thanksgiving?’” she quipped at the press conference, which laid out a new public safety plan for Union Square.

“We’re so in the holiday spirit this year. Mostly because we went through a global pandemic, and we couldn’t come together before [...] we were anxious to get the holiday started early,” Breed said.

Macy’s officials said the early lighting had more to do with scheduling given its multiple events across the country, but the sentiment rang true nonetheless. After a long two and a half years, this holiday season feels—for lack of a better term—normal. And many business and government leaders see the holiday shopping season as a chance for a hard reset in a downtown battered by bad press.

“We’re resetting the narrative,” said Marisa Rodriguez, the executive director of the Union Square Alliance. “As things are starting to stabilize right now, it’s so important for us to show that we are not only back, but we’re healthy and we have the support that we need from our city, from our community members.”



Marisa Rodriguez, Executive Director of the Union Square Alliance, in Union Square on Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2022 in San Francisco, Calif. | Paul Kuroda for The Standard

Public safety is central to that narrative as the city looks to move past last year's viral retail thefts that became a national embarrassment.

Union Square's new Safe Shopper initiative boosts law enforcement in the area, limits points of entry and car traffic and puts new security personnel in the area. That's on top of another city effort to grow the ranks of its Welcome Ambassadors, BART service attendants and retired police officers to around 400 people. Those staffers are posted in and around Downtown and other tourist hotspots, in addition to inside BART and Muni stations.

"It's a force multiplier, having more eyes and ears out there making sure things are healthy and safe is better for everyone," Rodriguez said. "It doesn't have to just be the police department, and it's actually better sometimes when it's not."

Patricia Reardon, who was walking out of Macy's carrying a Chanel bag and sporting a big smile, said she had heard about some of the increased safety measures and personally felt their impact.

"Downtown is the lifeblood of the city, and I feel it's important for everyone to come down to restaurants and shop in the city," Reardon said.

## **The New Normal**

Smaller signals of normalcy—including the adorable return of San Francisco SPCA's rescue animal holiday windows—are glimmering back to life too.

To capitalize on holiday momentum, the Union Square Alliance is launching Winter Wonderland, which will open on Black Friday and feature local merchants, artists and performers in Union Square and Hallidie Plaza.

"This year is about showing that people want to be out. They don't just want to shop online," Rodriguez said. "They want to Instagram and TikTok and take pictures and this is going to allow for that."

For cleaner photo backgrounds, the Department of Public Works is doing enhanced cleaning in Downtown commercial centers and other neighborhoods, including weekly powerwashing through the new year.

Mark Gairin, a tourist visiting from France, said the cleaning made a difference.

“We are really impressed with the city; it’s very very clean, and it’s very safe in the vast majority of parts,” Gairin said, adding that he thought the media attention to San Francisco’s issues was overblown.



Former SFPD officers Bart Johnson (left) speaks with SFPD officer Kunthea Johnson (center) and Warren Ng while they patrol Union Square on Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2022 in San Francisco, Calif. | Paul Kuroda for The Standard

The return of tourists, particularly from Europe, has been one bright spot in the city’s uneven post-pandemic recovery. SF Travel projects visitor spending to reach about \$6.7 billion this year, still down 30% from 2019 but nearly double last year’s numbers.

Hotels are following a similar trajectory: Hotel occupancy in October was more than 70% with an average daily rate of \$227.72, a major improvement from the previous year.

But the return of tourism has taken on new urgency as many Downtown offices remain empty. The Controller’s Office

expects a revenue loss of up to \$200 million annually from the ripple effect of remote work on the city's economy.

“Change is on the horizon. But I'm hopeful that if we double down on tourism, we will significantly expand our workforce as well,” said Alex Bastian, executive director of the Hotel Council of San Francisco.

Part of that is using the example of this year's successful return of the Dreamforce conference to help build a stronger foundation for conference and group travel. One event circled on Bastian's calendar is the J.P. Morgan Healthcare Conference scheduled for January, which he believes can set the stage for a strong comeback in 2023.

“Even small shifts to that trajectory can have lasting impacts for years to come,” said Bastian.

Still, it's a tall order. Most estimates show that San Francisco tourism won't fully recover for at least a couple more years. That's partly due to travel restrictions in China—formerly a top international market for tourists.

In the absence of those international travelers, however, business leaders say the city must redefine what it means to spend time Downtown.

## **A New Light**

The city's downtown core was responsible for some 70% of the city's GDP in the pre-pandemic era. But that was a different world that relied on office commuters for foot traffic and business.

Business leaders now talk about adopting a “hospitality mindset,” with messaging and programming meant to pull in tourists, as well as locals to work, shop and play Downtown.

Robbie Silver, executive director of the Downtown SF community benefit district, said that was the inspiration behind the Let’s Glow SF art installation, which initially started as a “ferry thought” Silver came up with while commuting into the city.

With three months of furious effort from his small team, the installation made its debut last December, painting the city’s largely shuttered Downtown structures with dazzling light projection displays.

“It was a big test case for us to say, ‘If we created a reason for people to come Downtown at night after 5 p.m., would it work?’” Silver said. “I wanted to create that curiosity that would help people experience Downtown in a different light.”

Silver said even though the displays coincided with the initial Omicron wave, the installation was visited by around 40,000 people and created \$2.2 million in increased spending to local businesses.



Projections on the exterior of the Pacific Stock Exchange in San Francisco in 2021 as part of Let's Glow SF project. | Courtesy Let's Glow SF

This year, the holiday lights festival—the largest of its kind in the country—will run from Dec. 2-11 across five Downtown locations.

This year, Silver is hoping to double last year's numbers with the help of funding by the Office of Economic and Workforce Development and creations from local artists who were offered grants to participate. Participating retailers are also offering discounted drinks and meals during the festival.

Silver hopes to use the event to help pitch the organization's Public Realm Action Plan, a new vision for Downtown co-created with the urban design firm Sitelab.

Ryan Uzilevsky, one of Let's Glow SF's participating artists, is a San Francisco native whose career took him around the world before the pandemic brought him back to the Bay Area.

That reconnection with his old stomping grounds inspired him to use Downtown as a canvas to convey the Bay Area's natural beauty, all in the hopes of helping the city remake itself after a difficult few years.

“I believe that the city has so much potential and so much to offer and can stand on its own again as a beacon for a globally progressive city,” Uzilevsky said.

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