

# SF launches "Vacant to Vibrant" program calling for ideas to turn office space into pop-up shops

By Jana Katsuyama | Published April 18, 2023 11:41PM | San Francisco | KTVU FOX 2 | [↗](#)

## San Francisco wants to turn vacant retail space into vibrant pop-ups

San Francisco is rolling out a new program that would turn vacant storefronts into vibrant pop-up shops. The pop-ups would be temporary and receive up to three-months free rent.

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**SAN FRANCISCO** - When Simon Bertrang walks through downtown San Francisco, he doesn't just see empty storefronts, he sees properties, full of potential. Bertrang is executive director of [SF New Deal](#), a non-profit chosen by the city to launch the program "Vacant to Vibrant".

"We are going to transform vacant retail spaces, vacant storefronts downtown into temporary popups of businesses, artists, community spaces," said Bertrang.

A judging panel will select three groups of winners. SF New Deal and the Downtown SF Partnership will partner to match them with commercial landlords.

"We've actually gone door-to-door in the financial district and Jackson Square to survey how many vacant spaces we have on the ground floor. And 1,336 so far, there's about 33 vacant spaces and 150,000 square feet," said Robbie Silver, Executive Director of the Downtown SF Partnership.

Bertrang says SF New Deal received about \$700,000 from the city to administer the program. The winning ideas will get grants from \$3,000 - \$8,000 to help cover rent for the temporary three-month leases.

"SF New Deal is going to take care of all of the logistics, the insurance, the lease negotiations with the property owners, the internet, providing internet service," said Bertrang.

Anyone with an idea of how to activate the vacant office space can file an application on the [VibrantSF.org](http://VibrantSF.org) website which began accepting applications on Monday. The online portal already had received more than 50 ideas by Tuesday afternoon.

The deadline to apply for the first round of popups is June first, with the goal of opening up the shops in the late summer. The second round of shops are scheduled to open in the winter.

It's an idea that is working in other parts of the city.

The [Japantown Community Benefit District](#) has helped a group of artists create a popup shop at an empty restaurant space.

Brenden Oshima, is a local artist and owner of Kuma Ink at [kumaink.com](http://kumaink.com), who is part of the pilot program.

"This bear I call him the Warriors bear and this year, I released the Daruma Rabbit for Year of the rabbit," said Oshima explaining some of the artwork that hung on the walls, tote bags, and apparel for sale.

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The small space on Webster Street used to house the Mifune Bistro restaurant. Now, it serves as retail space for Kuma Ink, [Higa Art](#), Nate1Design [New Skool](#), [SokoSF](#), SumoFish, and [Nihonmachi Street Fair](#).

"We do a range of goods. We do magnets, stickers, pins. All of us are basically local artists. We all have our little small businesses," said Oshima, "Having these popups has been amazing to actually getting to sit down and sell your stuff in person to the community and customers and get to have some face-to-face."

City leaders say these experiments are important to help San Francisco adjust to the new post-pandemic realities.

"The popups that we're describing are not the permanent solution to what's going to happen downtown, but they're ways to test out and experiment," said Bertrang.



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