

BAY AREA

# Downtown SF businesses to tax themselves to pay for clean streets, homeless outreach



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San Francisco businesses rarely celebrate new taxes.

But when given the choice to pay a little extra for more street cleaning, trash collection, power washing and street-beautification — all of which help attract tenants and customers — most landlords and businesses embrace the idea.

Merchant corridors have for years created commercial benefit districts, or CBDs — special zones where primarily commercial property owners elect to tax themselves a little extra to pay for additional services.

And at a time when the city is straining to keep its streets clean and attend to its homelessness and mental health crises, CBDs are increasingly stepping in to fill gaps in services.

On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors unanimously approved the city's newest CBD — the Downtown Community Benefit District. It's also one of the largest: Extra assessments on the 669 parcels on 43 blocks that make up the district will raise nearly \$4 million annually to “help augment the city's baseline services on everything from pressure washing to homeless outreach,” Supervisor **Aaron Peskin** said in a statement Wednesday.

Peskin was a longtime supporter of this CBD and represents the district where it resides. While merchants take a vote on whether to create CBDs, they have to be approved by the Board of Supervisors.

Supervisors also renewed CBDs encompassing portions of the North of Market/Tenderloin districts and Union Square. The board is scheduled to vote to renew and expand the Civic Center CBD next week.

CBDs began cropping up in places like Fisherman's Wharf, Noe Valley and the Castro district in 2005. With the support and encouragement of city officials — the districts are overseen in part by the Office of Economic and Workforce Development — they've flourished. The Downtown CBD is the city's 18th.

“A lot of cities are not set up the same way,” said **Marco Li Mandri**, the president of New City America who’s helped steer the formation of 10 CBDs in San Francisco and others in Los Angeles and San Diego. “The machinery is in place to make the whole thing work in San Francisco.”

**Debra Niemann**, executive director of the Noe Valley Association, a CBD, stressed that each district is different, offering varying services in response to the unique needs of individual neighborhoods and the size of the district overall, since smaller districts mean smaller revenue streams to pay for services. Unlike some CBDs, Niemann’s, for example, doesn’t hire extra security guards, focusing more resources on installing amenities like flower baskets and benches.

“Everyone is different. The problems in central Market or Union Square are very different than Noe Valley or even the Castro,” Niemann said. “I’m one of the smaller CBDs. But I’ll shamelessly tell you I’m one of the mightiest in terms of the improvements on the street.”

Each CBD has somewhat different priorities. The Yerba Buena Community Benefit District employs two full-time social services workers tasked with connecting people in need to services. The Lower Polk Community Benefit District partners with UC Hastings College of the Law, La Voz Latina and the San Francisco Bar Association to operate a landlord-tenant clinic meant to smooth out housing disputes that can lead to displacement — in addition to a host of daily street-cleaning services.

“We’re out there seven days a week, cleaning and doing maintenance work, picking up trash, needles, feces, abating graffiti — just basically adding extra boots on the ground to stay on top of those issues that affect quality of life for businesses, residents and visitors to the neighborhood,” said **Christian Martin** executive director of the Lower Polk CBD.