

# Experimental public urinal recycles the waste

By TOM CARTER

RESULTS FROM the 12-day public toilet offering on Ellis Street in July show a surprising success, Dina Hilliard, executive director of the Tenderloin CBD, reported at the Friends of Boeddeker Park meeting in September.

The trial run was to see how the open-top PPlanter urinal created by Hyphae Design Lab of Oakland would be received in the neighborhood. Hilliard said there was no graffiti during the trial and “20 to 30 gallons of urine was collected” during the trial. The urine was combined with water from 50-gallon barrels next to the urinal to nourish the PPlanter’s attached bamboo vegetation.

The PPlanter is now retired and vacationing at the Tenderloin National Forest but will be used for a new facility that Hyphae is building. It will feature a toilet and two urinals and is planned for the street in February.

“We’ve applied to the Department of Public Works for a permit for it for a year,” Hilliard said. But DPW was not eager originally, she said, puzzled because “all the money” for the new design came from the city. The city contributed a \$35,000 Community Challenge grant and an \$80,000 block grant.

Earlier, Mohammed Nuru, DPW director, said he isn’t sure if there’s a need for this facility or if a short-term pilot could adequately assess the neighborhood’s problems and determine benefits. But Hilliard said from subsequent discussions she’s had with DPW that the department favors the chosen new location — one parking space on Ellis in front of Boeddeker’s north gate. Before going ahead, DPW wants to see feedback from the CBD’s outreach to

the new site’s neighbors. The CBD will be sending them letters, Hilliard said.

The CBD has been in the forefront of establishing a portable public toilet for the Tenderloin, whose sidewalks and streets are relentlessly abused as an outdoor bathroom. The CBD gave Hyphae the first \$20,000 in 2011 to develop a prototype.

The PPlanter occupied two parking spaces in a white zone in front of Youth With a Mission, which volunteered the space. YWM on Friday afternoons offers free showers to the public.

Hilliard later gave more details of the July 12-24 trial run. About 75 people used the urinal, based on estimates from Wayne, a man “who had been sleeping on Ellis Street” and monitored the project and performed nontechnical maintenance for “a minimal amount” of money.

“He was checking every two hours for 24 hours a day, but obviously couldn’t be there all that time,” Hilliard said. “If it was trashed, he cleaned up.”

There were no needles found, she said, but the first day had three instances of “pooping” in the urinal. A no-poop sign was made showing a squatting man encircled in a red ring with a line through it “and it never happened again,” Hilliard said. “Pretty incredible. We didn’t know what to expect. People were really respectful once they knew.”

But after the PPlanter was removed, many feces piles appeared near the area, according to Hilliard, “a reason to put it back there.”

It was assumed that men only used the facility. It is uncovered and the feet and head of a person using it can be seen. “We had one complaint over a lack of privacy,” Hilliard said. ■



PHOTO COURTESY OF TENDERLOIN CBD

The PPlanter, developed with \$115,000 from the city and \$20,000 from the Tenderloin CBD, has a planter box that is attached and filled with growing bamboo, the greenery nourished with the diluted urine.

## Homeless can spruce up aboard bus with a shower

“Lávame” means “wash me” in Spanish. With a little twist to personalize a great idea, the word became Lava Mae, a new nonprofit raising funds to customize a bus with mobile showers.

“It would have two completely separate showers,” says Lava Mae founder Doniece Sandoval, “and the bus would move daily on a schedule we’d set with partner organizations — public and private — that lack showers for their homeless clients.”

Sandoval’s figures \$75,000 will outfit one bus. She hopes to raise enough money to take delivery of the bus by November and begin testing the service early next year in the Tenderloin.

She’s going after public and private funding and is doing crowdfunding through IndieGoGo. That’s already brought in \$47,000, and a little goes a long way: A \$25 donation can pay for a day’s worth of showers — 100 chances to get clean, Lava Mae estimates.

The plan is to have the side of the bus carry the organization’s motto: “Delivering dignity, one shower at a time.” ■

— Marjorie Beggs



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CENTRAL CITY EXTRA is published monthly by the nonprofit San Francisco Study Center Inc., serving the community since 1972. The Extra was initiated through grants from the S.F. Hotel Tax Fund and the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund. The contents are copyrighted by the San Francisco Study Center, 944 Market Street, Suite 701, San Francisco, CA 94102.

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