

Gentrification casualty: Tet Festival

No celebration in the hood for 1st time in 25 years

BY MARK HEDIN

IN THE GENTRIFYING Tenderloin, the party's over for tens of thousands of Vietnamese Americans. For the first time in at least 25 years, there was no Tet Festival, the Vietnamese community's Lunar New Year celebration.

"Tet is a very big celebration," said Judy Young, Vietnamese Youth Development Center executive director. "Families come out, children come out." The festival would feature "food, flowers, entertainment and a fashion show showcasing the beauty and clothing of Vietnamese culture." After Little Saigon became a destination, the annual party would extend along a T-shaped constellation of closed-off Tenderloin streets, Larkin between Eddy and O'Farrell and O'Farrell from Hyde to Polk.

But the organizer of the Tet Festival over the past several years, the Vietnamese Community Center, shut down a few

months ago, and was unable to follow through on its grant from the city to help fund this year's event. Grants for the Arts had approved \$15,920, up from \$14,210 in 2015. The grant reimburses expenses, so with no festival the city money wasn't lost.

"This year is the first year that Little Saigon is not having the festival. It's not right, it's not good," Young said. "It's important that we continue to voice our need. We're really losing slowly the culture. It's bigger than just the closure, our folks just can't afford to be here anymore. It's been going on for a long time, but it's becoming more pronounced."

"Not enough people, not enough finance, not a lot of support, booth sponsors ...," Tony Nguyen, manager of community development at Southeast Asian Community Center, told The Extra.

When Tuong Vi of the Vietnamese Elderly Mutual Assistance Association

learned there would be no Tet Festival, she was "really sad. I did not know until last month," she told The Extra.

The association, with two paid staff, helps 135 disabled and low-income seniors each year, she said. For "at least 10 years" it has had a booth at the Tet Festival to highlight its presence in the neighborhood. "Usually, I can ask them for the booth," Vi said. But this year, they said, "Oh, no, we won't have it. No money."

"We still see the TL as a center of the Vietnamese community, whether that community is there or not," said Sonny Le, census expert, media consultant and San Francisco State extension instructor. "I know for a fact that people will come back to the TL to celebrate. I feel saddened."

Philip Nguyen, executive director of the Southeast Asian Community Center, told The Extra the festival's cancel-

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PHOTOS BY: MARK HEDIN

Bao Nguyen (top), Garden Grove mayor, speaks at the Feb. 20 party. Twins Kayla (left) and Kayle join in the fun.

Brouhaha over Tenderloin Police Station community room

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two years later settled at the police community room. Centrally located, the station space has good lighting and acoustics, is accessible and safe, has spotless bathrooms, and, perhaps most important for a public-interest group with no funding, it's free and is neutral turf.

It's "available to nonprofit community-based organizations only," states the room request form. Among the more obvious caveats — no drugs or alcohol, no selling any items or charging admission fees — individuals or groups using the room "cannot exclude any member of the public."

Community activist Michael Nulty has co-administered the collaborative with TL resident Susan Bryan since 2013, the year that Rev. Glenda Hope stepped down after retiring as executive director of S.F. Network Ministries, a pioneer program that disbanded when she left. Nulty alerts a list of almost 200 by email about upcoming meetings, coordinates presentations and books the meetings a year in advance at the police station.

But he got a surprise when he went to the station in mid-November to book 2016's meetings: Another organization had been given the 12-month slot.

"I first went to schedule the collaborative meetings Oct. 21," Nulty told The Extra, "but they said they didn't even have the log book yet and I should come with my completed form the next month. I came back Nov. 18 and got the news some other group had already scheduled the third Wednesdays."

SCHEDULING SNAFU

Nulty phoned Sgt. Susa Black, who's handled room scheduling for a decade but wasn't there either Oct. 21 or Nov. 18, to explain the snafu. Nulty wasn't there to take her return call so she left a voicemail. She said she hadn't received his request and asked him to resubmit it to her attention.

A minute later, she left a second message: There was "a scheduling conflict," she said, naming a Community Housing Partnership staffer who had put in a request for third Wednesdays on Oct. 21 — the day Nulty first went to the station to book for the collaborative.

"Yours was dated in November, and my supervisor says I have to honor first-come, first-served," Sgt. Black said.

Nulty contacted CHP about changing its meeting date but was told it couldn't be changed. He had to scramble to cancel the January collaborative meeting via email and then alert people that meetings have been moved to third Thursdays.

"Changing our date isn't the end of the world," Nulty concedes, but it is an

inconvenience for community members who've been scheduling the collaborative gatherings on the same day for 13 of the Collaborative's 15 years, he says. He also wondered why CHP, a nonprofit that provides housing and job training to the previously homeless, needed the room as its office is just two blocks away.

CHP staffer Garrett Collins told The Extra that the agency booked the station room for monthly "nonviolence training" sessions for CHP clients. Asked if the meetings are open to the public: "No," Collins said, an apparent violation of police station rules.

When The Extra first phoned Black about the collaborative being bumped from its longtime slot, she reiterated what she'd told Nulty. A week later, this reporter left her a message asking why the community room was being used for a private gathering, but she didn't call back.

CAPTAIN'S OPAQUE DENIAL

Instead, Capt. Ewin rang us, a call we missed, followed by an unsuccessful round of telephone tag. Finally, in response to our email to police commissioners about the room possibly being misused, Capt. Ewin responded by email:

"All meetings that go on in Tenderloin Stations Community Room are open to the public. We will reach out to all of those individuals that use our space regularly and again point out that All users of the space shall have the meetings open to the public as required and indicated on the sign-up sheet. Thank you for your time."

We asked for clarification: Did her "reach out" to CHP generate any changes?

"We took care of the issue and it is resolved," she answered. "As I stated, all meetings are open to the public."

How? we wondered.

Capt. Ewin's answer: "I will not be responding in how I handled the situation other than say it is open to the public and if anyone believes otherwise we can connect them with locations where they can have a private meeting."

And we got no response to our query to CHP: Has anything changed with the meetings?

Meanwhile, the collaborative's Feb. 18 meeting was sparsely attended. On the agenda were two business relocations and a report on a neighborhood health initiative.


Pandora, a karaoke bar at 177 Eddy for seven years, is moving to 50 Mason. Attorney Mark Rennie, Pandora's entrepreneur, and Jeff Ng, its manager, told the group they're "being evicted" from their current location and have applied to move their liquor license for wine, beer and spirits to the new spot. Rennie said 50 Mason has an existing license, but it doesn't include spirits.

"We attract good people," said Ng. "Mark Zuckerberg is a regular."

Another relocation in the works is St. James Infirmary. The occupational health and safety clinic for sex workers and their families has to leave 1372 Mission, near 10th Street, where it's been for 14 of its 17 years, explained Stephany Ashley, executive director. The building has been sold and is being razed. St. James, which gets about 5,000 visits a year from clients, already has signed a sublease through the Department of Public Health for 234 Eddy, a now-vacant former clinic on the ground floor of the Windsor Hotel next to Boeddeker Park. DPH holds the master lease on the entire building.

Last on the agenda was a presentation by Abbie Yant, vice president for mission, advocacy and community health at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital. She summarized the work of Saint Francis Foundation's Tenderloin Health Improvement Partnership, a 2-year-old effort that coordinates neighborhood health data and makes significant grants — it funded \$1 million for TL health initiatives in 2015 and is committed to the same this year. "Seeding Change" is TenderloinHIP's 2015 report about its work. For copies, contact Yant: abbie.yant@dignityhealth.org.

The next Tenderloin Futures Collaborative meeting is at the Police Station, 301 Eddy, Thursday, March 17, 11 a.m. ■



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