

Twitter tax break cost to city tops \$55 million

BY MARK HEDIN

IT'S BEEN A QUIET YEAR for the local watchdog. On the evening of Oct. 6, six of the volunteer members of the Citizens Advisory Committee for the Central Market & Tenderloin Area finally reported for duty at City Hall.

It was their first meeting all year.

When Peter Masiak arrived, 45 minutes late, finally there were enough members present to constitute a quorum, so official business could begin.

"Morale is really low," Steven Tennis said. "That needs to be addressed." Tennis was appointed to the 11-member panel in July 2013. He works as a tenant organizer at the SRO Collaborative and is a regular presence during Safe Passage hours, helping ensure that Tenderloin school kids get where they need to be safely.

Tennis was joined on the dais by SEIU organizer Masiak, Sam Dennison of Faithful Fools, Chairman Rob Gitin, who founded and runs the homeless youth advocacy nonprofit At the Crossroads, longtime housing advocate Brad Paul and SoMa gadfly Antoinetta Stadlman. Haberdasher Julian Dash was absent, and four seats have been vacant for at least a year.

The committee, formed by trailing legislation introduced by D6 Supervisor Jane Kim in the aftermath of the mayor signing the Twitter tax break in 2011, is

intended to be the community's eyes and ears on the benefits that the well-funded tech companies are obligated to provide to mitigate their impact on the neighborhood.

The rule of thumb for these benefits, though never put into the letter of the law, was that big companies opting out of paying the city's 1.5% tax on payroll, should return about a third of their savings in some form of community benefits. The Citizens Advisory Committee assumed its role was to help draft those deals and monitor compliance.

The tax break cost the city almost \$16 million last year, according to the treasurer and tax collector's annual reporting for a four-year total of \$55.6 million — far beyond the \$22 million, six-year estimate the Board of Supervisors were told about back when they voted for it.

But that's not the role Kim envisioned. Her ordinance labels the citizens committee "advisory," and virtually equipped the members with rubber stamps to do their work.

CAC efforts to get more muscular community benefit agreement commitments from the tech companies have been frustrated at every turn. As fast-talking Bill Barnes, City Administrator Naomi Kelly's point man in the process through its early years, reminded the panel on occasion, its role is strictly advisory.

So in 2014, when the committee re-

fused to ratify five of the six agreements, Kelly simply signed them anyway.

The panel was flummoxed again at year's end when, upon reviewing what it understood to be draft CBAs, learned from the city administrator's office that it had just completed its review for the year.

Three of those agreements were long-term pacts for the biggest companies involved — Twitter, Microsoft and Zendesk — four-year deals that would take them through their remaining years of eligibility for the tax break.

"There's a bit of apathy among CAC members, you might say," said Tennis, the ever-upteat and energetic tenant activist, perhaps excluding himself. "To turn it around is going to be difficult."

But the committee heard last month how Twitter has donated \$793,000 to four categories of D6 action: improving educational outcomes and digital literacy for youth (\$270,000); supporting workforce development (\$153,000); addressing family and youth homelessness (\$275,000, including support for At the Crossroads, Compass Family Services, the Eviction Defense Collaborative, Glide, Hamilton Family Center and Raphael House); and \$95,000 toward community strengthening and neighborhood improvements, notably providing some pro bono legal help for the Justice and Diversity Center's eviction defense efforts.

Zendesk gifted almost a quarter million, including \$50,000 to DeMarillac Academy, which also got \$15,000 from Microsoft. Spotify mimicked Zendesk's longstanding scheduling of Tenderloin walking tours led by Del Seymour and also contributed two rickshaw-style bikes to the Curry Senior Center enabling volunteers to take willing seniors for neighborhood spins.

Microsoft also spent \$136,000 or so locally, much of it with top tech company caterer Green Heart, as it has for years.

Twitter's big give in the process has been the creation of its Neighbor Nest, on the ground floor of Fox Plaza.

"It sounds really good," Tennis said. "I haven't been there."

"The numbers could be bigger. You have to have an appointment" to use its services, he pointed out — they were initially limited to people vetted by the Hamilton Family Center and Compass Family Services.

Even Tiffany Apczynski of Zendesk, emblematic of the spirit of community building that the community benefit agreements held out hope for, in May said citizen review is pretty much done for.

Neither Zendesk nor Twitter responded to The Extra's requests to discuss the latest developments. City Administrator Kelly continued to steadfastly refuse comment to our every question.

"Isn't it human nature to do the least amount possible?" Tennis asked. ■

Jazz story wins 2nd award

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

JOHN BURKS' "I can still hear it," his remembrance of the Tenderloin's Blackhawk jazz club, has won an Excellence in Journalism award from the prestigious Northern California Society of Professional Journalists.

SPJ annually honors "journalists whose outstanding work embodies SPJ's ideals of initiative, integrity, talent and compassion."

Burks' story, which appeared in the June 2015 Central City Extra, won in the arts and culture category for print media with circulations of less than 100,000.

SPJ's 31st award ceremony, Nov. 15, will honor 43 winners in print, online, radio, audio, TV and video media.

Burks, emeritus professor at San Francisco State University and former chair of its Department of Journalism, is a contributing writer to The Extra and the long-time president of the San Francisco Study Center Board of Directors.

Newsweek correspondent, Rolling Stone's first managing editor, investigative reporter for the San Francisco Examiner and Oakland Tribune, and editor of KQED's San Francisco Focus are among the highlights of his journalism career.

Burks' "I can still hear it" also won third place for a feature story of a light nature at the San Francisco/Peninsula Press Club's 39th annual Great Bay Area award program in September. ■



PHOTO DEBORAH NAGLE-BURKS
John Burks and rescue Yorkie, Matilda.

69-year milestone

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

chanic, driver and carpenter, "and a electrician, too," Veronica pipes up. "He could do everything." And as a self-taught musician, he played the violin, the guitar and harmonica. But the guitar now gathers dust in their closet by the front door.

He points to it and smiles at the memory.

"No more," he says.

Asked the age-old question of what's the secret to keeping it together for 69 years, Emilio mulls it over.

"We don't quarrel," he says finally.

There's a pregnant pause.

"Oh, sometimes, I guess," Virginia adds. "Like a husband and wife." ■

Learn the Basics of Building a Website for your Business – FREE!

Big Tech for Small Biz is a monthly training series offering free and low-cost tips, tricks, apps and more to help your business succeed!

Classes held 3rd Thursdays - FREE
6-8pm @Impact Hub 901 Mission St.



Receive training from tech and business companies such as: **Twitter, Wells Fargo, Kiva, NerdWallet, VehicleSF, DesignCrowd, Oakland Digital, Townsquared,** and more!

November
Building a Website

January
Social Media & E-communications

February
Business Finance

March
Building Customers

April
Working in the Cloud

May
Access to Capital

Sign Up Today!

bit.ly/BigtechUS2016

415-553-4433

info@urbansolutionsssf.org

Funded by the SOMA Stabilization Fund