

Gummed sidewalks get steam treatment

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square block. Although the overall result is pristine and glorious concrete by comparison, Collins said this is far too slow for the 57 sponsors that pay TSIP for this level of cleaning.

"We don't want our sponsors, who are like customers, to wonder because of a slow rate where this service is that they are paying for," Collins said. "It's not enough. We need more frequent cycles."

The highest density of gummed sidewalks, Collins said, is around Hastings Law School, suggesting the endemic untidiness of ruminating law students.

When the \$200,000-a-year TSIP was created in 1999 by the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Foundation and city hotel tax funds, Mayor Willie Brown cut the ribbon at 201 Turk St. and a clunky, \$40,000 sidewalk sweeper rolled out to brighten the neighborhood. It was called the Rite Aid machine because it wore an ad for the store chain that donated half its cost.

The sidewalks hadn't had a decent cleaning in 30 years, Collins said.

Together with the Facade Improvement Program, TSIP was determined to show how the neighborhood could shine its own boots. Then and there, the Rite Aid machine caused minor miracles in cleanliness and coloration.

"The difference between night and day," observed bystander Gayle Wood at the time. The welcome step was literally one above the Green Machines of the DPW, which plied only the streets, sweeping away debris and spraying water to keep the dust down.

But while the Rite Aid machine, and later its smaller sister the Tenant 7200, toiled around the Tenderloin with a soap and water, disinfectant and scrubbing detail, it just removed the top soil, so to speak. Dwelling the necessary full minute to vanquish old gum would invite the machine's premature demise. Moreover, the machines couldn't get any closer than six inches to a building or to "street furniture" —objects such as light and signs posts, benches and postal boxes.

Tenderloin sidewalks were getting cleaner five days a week, true. But they still had dirty ears and a ring around the neck.

Enter the steam machine. It was supposed to be the versatile, swift and efficient knight in armor.

Actually, it was a diesel-powered engine with an 800-gallon water tank, long hose

and attached spraying wand. To haul it, a Broyhill Terraforce Prime Mover, a motorized flatbed cart that's at home on golf courses, was purchased along with the steamer for a total of \$30,000.

Dick duBey, director of marketing for the New Sprayer Technology Co. of Oakland, which sold the machine to TSIP, said the city has about 15 of these durable workhorse sprayers and some have been running 10 or more years.

"Old gum isn't unique to the Tenderloin," duBey said. "It gets ground into the pores of concrete and it becomes part of the sidewalk. To get it out without damaging the concrete, you need a combination of heat (to soften), pressure and abrasion, applied carefully. You want to leave a smooth, high traction surface. It (the concrete) should have a lifetime of several decades."

According to duBey, a company apparently tried out last fall for a Tenderloin sidewalk cleaning contract with the city. "It was a legitimate company that had done some good asbestos removal, I think," duBey said. "It came in using extremely high pressure and cold water. It had some impressive equipment. But it was overkill. The machinery took about 1/16th of an inch off the top and aged the sidewalk 15 years. It was a good thing it was only one quarter of a block."

That wasn't what San Francisco was looking for. (Just a quarter-inch down, the fine mix of concrete turns pebbly, crumbles, spalls and breaks up; the "float coat" is gone like the gild off a lily, and on it a spilled cup of coffee is irrevocably ugly.) TSIP then bought its own machine.

"But TSIP did not rush into this," duBey pointed out. "They were cautious. And we have been delighted to work with them. The city itself is very caring about maintaining its beauty."

The steam machine has never wavered. Its \$30,000-a-year operator, the conscientious Yoeung Chhith, works 40 hours a week nuzzling the steam wand right up to sidewalk furniture, blasting building and gutter edges, attacking gum and spraying all the square inches of a block of concrete. Collins estimates that the machine will use \$500 a year in water. Another \$2,500 will be used to train an additional operator.

The rate of speed is a crucial issue as it relates cleanliness and a visual effect. "Customers won't go into stores if the sidewalks aren't clean," Collins said. "These things affect commerce."

In January, Collins wrestled with various results from different experimental rates. He sent a survey letter to TSIP's sponsors. It listed options ranging from slow deep cleaning in a three-times-a-year cycle to a rapid two-times a month. In all but the deep cleaning, residual effects ranged from "leopard" spots

to "zig-zag" shadows on the pavement.

Early returns favored a compromise. Collins was happy. It meant a livable uniform color and a patient approach to gum and spot removal. With each cycle, fewer stains, and with their eventual removal, more frequent cycles. "This can all be a non-problem in six months," Collins said.

Even so, the service is only for 57 sponsors who have signed on with TSIP in the 22-block area with its 318 buildings. Those not being serviced will show the grayness and scars of the past.

The majority of the sponsors pay a monthly service rate, \$1 per unit in a building (hotel, apartment building, office etc.) or \$1 per frontage linear square foot (merchants). This and DPW and Neighborhood Beautification grants complete TSIP's funding.

It is Collins' challenge to convince the holdouts that a brighter neighborhood is worth it. In six months he has increased participation from 13% to 28%. He aims for 100 sponsors by year's end.

"It's a lot of hard work to get them on board," said the tall, articulate, former labor organizer and telemarketer from Detroit. "I spend my time trying to sign people up. but they have to believe that clean sidewalks will lead to more commerce. Tourists won't go to a hotel if the sidewalks aren't clean."

Two locations that are not sponsors are the Nikko Hotel on Mason and Renaissance Parc 55 whose backside is on Mason, the eastern boundary of TSIP's area, which takes in sidewalks on both sides of the street. Their fair share would each be \$1,000 a month, Collins estimated.

"People who go into hotels want clean sidewalks," he said. "The cost of us doing it is less than they would pay someone else. We need positive foot traffic and we need agreement in a neighborhood that looks like it can take care of itself. It's hard to get people to see it, sometimes."

A few blocks away, Union Square has an ideal model.

"It's very different people," Collins said. "It's a business improvement district and everyone has to pay like a tax for security and sidewalks. We don't have a district and there are no plans for it. But we'd like to function that way for assessments — keeping the neighborhood clean as the cost of doing business for anyone with an investment in the neighborhood."

Lingering, still, are gaps. The steam-cleaned frontage of sponsors will have a nicer appearance than those not participating. And then what's a great sidewalk if some buildings look awful?

Of no threat, though, is any outbreak of young gum. Dressed in yellow slicks and gloves, operator Chhith pulled down his white dust mask, grinned and said, "It takes no time." ■



Fifty-seven sponsors pay for the sidewalk cleaning program.

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