

Pockets of brightness on small-business tour

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the commission's new Web site, sfsbiz.info. "But they had a hard time getting out what it was."

The most frequent complaints were: slow police response, the creeping scuzziness of Boeddeker Park, and problems caused by the drug trade.

Surprisingly, though just about everyone said business is down, no one seemed unsettled or angry. Most owners had been in business in the Tenderloin from eight to 30 years, and had become resilient in the gloom of the economic downturn.

Gwen Kaplan, vice president of the commission, found it inspiring to talk to several businesspeople who were born and raised in the neighborhood, to see the pride they had in their businesses, and to walk into the Bel Aire Hotel on Jones Street and feel comfortable right away.

"But people are concerned about the maintenance of the park (Boeddeker)," she says. "People don't want to send their children into it. There are needles in the sand. The trees need attention. We have to do something about it. It's attracting the wrong people."

Shawn Collins, executive director of the Tenderloin Sidewalk Improvement Program, went on the tour led by Supervisor Daly.

"He (Daly) has widespread recognition and my sidewalk program doesn't," Collins says. "I'm saddened. And we're there five days a week!"

On Collins' tour, the nagging specter of the neighborhood as unsafe came up in conversations, despite cleaner streets and sidewalks and the glow of small businesses.

"Two people mentioned that the police were slow to respond," he said. "One was a doctor's administrative assistant, the other a grocery store owner on Leavenworth. Supervisor Daly gave them his card and said to call him if it happens again and he would follow it up."

WALKS BEGAN ON OCEAN AVE.

The Merchant Walks began last September on Ocean Avenue when merchants called the mayor's office to complain about their businesses being crippled first by 9/11, then by the onslaught of Muni construction. The street was a mess.

"The city should pay us back was their attitude," said Seth Steward, director of the Small Business Commission. "We couldn't do that. But what could we do? We could gather a list of services for small businesses that could help them."

The SBC was started in 1999 to develop a supportive relationship between San Francisco's 60,000 small businesses and City Hall. Its purpose is to identify problems and find ways to solve them while maintaining a healthy climate for small businesses. The SBC office is in City Hall, and the commission meets there the second Monday of each month at 5:30 p.m.

On Ocean, owners couldn't get away from work to research solutions, so SBC reps coming to them was a welcome sight. The SBC formed a relationship with the Muni project manager. Subsequently, signs were posted, apologizing to the public for the inconvenience and stressing that businesses remained open.

Third Street was next, then Fillmore, then Chinatown where the SBC formed a partnership with the Asian Pacific Islander Business Information Services, as it had with the Southeast Asian Community Center. The responses from Chinatown were much greater after the walk.

"The week after the walk, our office got 10 to 15 calls about parking," Steward says. "People complained that there were too many yellow zones and that businesses were parking there and not using the yellow zones for business purposes. If there's no parking, people will leave the neighborhood."

Steward arranged for a meeting with Fred Hamdon of the Department of Parking and



Martha Yanez shows Saleem Abbas at the Faithful Fools Copy Shop a helpful phone number.

Traffic. They discussed creating signs in Chinatown to direct people to public parking lots, a plan that is in the works.

PARKING ALWAYS A PAIN

"But parking is the No. 1 concern for all businesses," Steward says.

"I pay twice as much for a meter here in the Tenderloin as I do on Polk," Cornell says, as he began his Tenderloin walk west on Turk toward Hyde where there seemed to be ample street parking. He paused at a 25-cents-for-15-minutes meter to peer up at the architecture. Cornell said he loved the ornate, old buildings and he dissed the cold, flat look of the new ones to his group consisting of Martha Yanez, the SBC staffer who created the Guide, and Lucia Hughes of the Work Force Investment Board.

"The Tenderloin has changed," Cornell says. "It used to be rooming houses and apartment buildings with small businesses on the ground floor like cleaners, beauty shops, groceries and liquor stores. The businesses kept the sidewalk clean and made things attractive. For low-income workers here, it was cheaper rents and a good place to walk to work from."

"After the 1989 earthquake, the city said the brick buildings had to be upgraded—brick just falls apart in earthquakes. Many owners couldn't afford it. So the buildings were bought by nonprofits that could get the federal government to help pay for the building changes. Now there are a lot more offices. They aren't trying to attract people. It's not the same incentive. And it was part of the demise of the neighborhood."

Turning right onto Hyde, the group starts hitting just about every small business. All appear clean and well-kept. To clerks, waitresses and managers, Cornell and Yanez take

turns explaining they represent the SBC and are delivering this free, resourceful guide. Several recipients are first wary, then manage a smile when they decide it isn't a scam.

'WE'RE SURVIVING'

Cornell usually asked how long they have been in business, then, "Business down?" The reply is a nod, a shrug or "slow."

On Hyde, the street businesses alternate between Mexican and Vietnamese. In a few places, no one speaks English but SBC's material is accepted for the boss anyway.

The group visits the corner donut shop at Golden Gate, which used to be a Greek family's coffee shop; then Mex Express check-cashing, where Cornell is delighted to see Monica

behind the glass partition selling perfume on the side; the New Style Beauty Shop (in business 18 years); the 20-year-old corner grocery ("We're surviving," says the owner); and Hai's Restaurant (Chinese and Thai).

The group continues to the New Princess Market, where the owner's retort "summer is coming" is meant to sweep away any economic dismay; the small Vietnamese Sing Sing restaurant, where tropical plants dominate the tiny foyer; a cigarette store; the Cafe Hurghada; an aquarium store with no sign, only a door that the Asian family who runs it keeps open seven days a week; the 30-year-old Lafayette Coffee Shop, where the waitress has worked 17 years; the Faithful Fools Copy Shop; the Cadillac Grocery; and the Cafe Mong Thu.

Of these, the small Cafe Hurghada at 457 Hyde is the baby. With new paint, gleaming fixtures and inviting pastries, its indoor and outdoor plants, and sidewalk tables and teakwood bench beckon passers-by as a trendy Hyde Street anomaly.

Owner Ahmed Moniem, a former insurance adjuster who did catering on the side, took the plunge a year and a half ago. He named the sandwich and coffee shop after his favorite resort town on the Red Sea, in Egypt.

"Two coffee shops had failed here before me," Moniem said later in an interview. "And nobody wanted this place. But I saw it as a nice backyard with no flowers and something I could cultivate. And it worked."

Moniem hired interior decorating and menu consultants. He added personal touches like a rug for a wall decoration and vases of cut flowers. No doubt his affability and manners won customers from the first day.

"Business is good," he says. "You should see the crowd at lunch-time. And people said in the beginning I was stupid. But this is a real coffee shop."

Now he gets daily referrals from the youth hostel around the corner. They are people in-

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timidated by the neighborhood who want to relax in a safe, tasteful harbor and read the paper. He even gets customers waiting for their cars at a nearby auto repair shop. "The owner said he sends them here because he knows it's a nice place," Moniem said. "And tourists are always taking pictures here."

What disturbs him is the Hyde Street drug trade and its shady characters, plus a "cold feeling" the street has. "I'd like to see trees planted," Moniem says. "And I'd like to see other businesses come here, too."

Back at the Up and Away Cafe, the merchants' Tenderloin walk dissolved just before noon without a concluding meeting. The face of small business had been impressive. But the Tenderloin's acne persisted. ■

A three-panel mural on Jones Street just north of Boeddeker Park urges tolerance.