

Transforming 6th Street

Applicants lining up for improvement loans but it's been tough sell

BY TOM CARTER

There were some long faces at Tu Lan when loyal lunch customers arrived at the wildly popular small Vietnamese eatery in early January and found construction under way. The landmark on Sixth near Market, as celebrated for its imperial rolls as it has been notorious for its greasy spoon ambiance, was getting a face-lift — from the inside out.

Tu Lan is installing a new ventilation system, a blessed renovation stimulated by a \$9,500 forgivable loan courtesy of Six on Sixth. Now, customers can kiss those grimy walls goodbye and Tu Lan's neighbors can ponder face-lifts of their own.

The loan is part of \$670,000 that the Redevelopment Agency approved in November 2002 to encourage business and property owners on seedy Sixth Street to make improvements and help spark a hoped-for neighborhood transformation. So far, only 7% of the funds have been spent. But more projects are in the pipeline, and the program may be picking up speed.

Six on Sixth targets the South of Market Redevelopment sector where Sixth Street is the main artery and focus. It envisions a parade of new businesses filling fresh retail spaces as well as renovated storefronts, formerly bleak and empty. The plan is administered by Urban Solutions, a non-profit headed by Executive Director Roger Gordon, who ran for District 6 supervisor in 2002.

Six on Sixth helps the city to at long last make good on its pledge to help transform skid row.

Companion measures include sidewalk improvements and loans for SRO hotels.

Last spring, Gordon had 15 applications on his desk for facade and tenant improvement loans, including the one from Tu Lan. The deal was, Tu Lan got free design assistance from Asian Neighborhood Design and a forgivable — i.e., free money — \$9,500 loan. The total construction cost came to \$37,000, with the restaurant picking up the difference.

One month into 2004, Gordon has received a total of 21 applications, eight from business owners, 13 from property owners. So far, three projects

had been completed. Under construction, including Tu Lan, are another three.

That box score is neither slow nor disappointing to Gordon.

"I thought the first year it would be maybe three-four projects," Gordon says. "I didn't think we'd be this heavily subscribed."

"It has taken some time to work out the bugs — when you are spending public money you take your time and do it right," he adds. "But our average time for completion keeps falling. So, with

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Ed Quiambao, left, and Barry Picazo want to open a Filipino restaurant at the Delta Hotel.

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