

Tenderloin fights on to stymie 38-Geary cuts

Daly dubious supervisors on transit authority will overturn plan to slash bus stops

BY TOM CARTER

A campaign by Tenderloin activists to save five neighborhood stops on the heavily traveled 38-Geary bus line failed Sept. 7 when the Municipal Transportation Agency voted 4-1 to drop the stops and make \$400,000 worth of other changes to enhance bus reliability and traffic flow.

The cuts will save the route one minute, two at most, each way, according to the city's Inner Geary Transportation Plan.

Activists, riled by a loss of service affecting families, the elderly and disabled in a high transit-dependent area, vowed to take up the cause again.

"The time savings isn't enough to justify the cuts, and we will try to stop this part of the plan from being implemented on Oct. 19," said Richard Allman, a veteran community planner who led the opposition. "This is mind-boggling, bad public policy. We are a transit-first city. And it's not consistent with the tone set by the mayor and the Board of Supervisors to not remove services from seniors and the disabled."

The Plans and Programs Committee of the county Transportation Authority meets Oct. 19 in Room 263 of City Hall to weigh the plan. If approved, it will be considered for adoption on Oct. 26 by the Transportation Authority, whose membership is comprised of the full Board of Supervisors.

District 6 Supervisor Chris Daly, who months ago opposed eliminating the stops and urged Muni to reconsider, said prospects now are gloomy. He serves on Plans and Programs but by Sept. 30 hadn't started counting votes.

"I'll give it a try, but I am not optimistic," Daly said. "It's a tough issue. Basically, I'll ask them to vote down a big package. But no other district is losing stops, so it's a tough sell."

Allman said the people most impacted live in the middle of the Tenderloin.

"They use the 38 to go to work or to shop and carry back groceries," he said. "This is an issue about people having to walk a fourth block when they are tired. Plain and simple, it is a service take-away."

Activists mounted a strong protest over several months, garnering nearly 400 signatures on an online petition and 150 letters of support, according to Allman.

If the plan is adopted, the 38's two inbound stops on O'Farrell at Larkin and Leavenworth will "probably" be gone in November, Muni special projects coordinator Joe Speaks told The Extra a week after the vote. The outbound stops on Geary at Mason, Jones and Hyde won't be clipped until early 2005, when all the changes are to be completed. Muni studies showed these stops to be the least used among the 19 on inner Geary.

The new stop pattern falls within the Muni proposed



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

With two 24-hour restaurants nearby, the 38-Geary stop at Mason and Geary is a rendezvous area for hungry late-night bar hoppers. It is one of five stops the Municipal Transportation Agency voted to cut to save Richmond District riders one minute a trip.

plan guidelines of 800-1,000 feet between stops; with the cuts, the new stops are 700-900 feet apart. Cutting one stop in the Tenderloin adds 400 feet for passengers to walk, more than the length of a football field and its end zones.

The 38-Geary's full route, according to Muni figures, is the nation's busiest with 54,000 passengers daily. From the ocean to the Transbay Terminal at First and Mission, it traverses the Outer and Inner Richmond, Japantown, the Western Addition, the Tenderloin and downtown.

Speaks denied the cuts were an economy move or even "a cut in service," but rather a "policy position" fashioned by Muni and Parking and Traffic that "cleans up flow issues." Muni planners at the Tenderloin Futures Collaborative in February estimated that making all the changes called for in the plan would result in "a 40% increase in reliability."

With no supermarket nearby, families, the disabled and elderly take the 38 west to shop, Allman said. Many elderly walk down and up street inclines to Geary and O'Farrell to catch the bus. And while the Lower Polk Neighborhood and Hamilton Condominium associations opposed cutting the stops, Speaks pointed out, the Senior Action Network, a pedestrian advocacy group, supported the full plan. But SAN didn't vote to endorse until its regular monthly meeting three days after the MTA hearing.

Ed Evans, a member of the network's Pedestrian and Transportation Committee,

said he vigorously opposed dropping the stops but was the only dissenting vote. "I was especially concerned about the Geary-Mason stop because a lot of seniors come from all over to go to the theaters," Evans told The Extra. "The Curran and ACT asked me to oppose that one for them, too."

Bruce Livingston, SAN executive director, was guarded about the vote. The network won a regional Metropolitan Transportation Commission award two years ago for its work on behalf of pedestrians.

"We bought into (Muni's plan)," Livingston told The Extra. "It was a good (committee) discussion. There are lots of improvements. But we did it because Joe (Speaks) promised to revisit the issue (of the stops) in six months. I sincerely hope that it's an authentic improvement."

Seventeen people spoke in favor of keeping the stops at the MTA hearing while 14 wanted them eliminated and the plan adopted intact. The latter included representatives of the Sierra Club, Teamsters whose trucks would get more and longer yellow zones (at the expense of 40 parking places), taxi drivers who could use the bus transit lane, and organized bicyclists who would have more room to ride.

Tenderloin residents, who also protested at a June 4 DPT hearing, said the plan ignored the views of TL bus passengers. Richard Marquez said eliminating the stops would foster "transit racism and transit classism." Another resident complained the plan appeases Richmond riders. Another said it tells "poor people that they

don't count." A Rescue Muni spokesman countered that bus reliability will improve and the planned bus bulbs and low-floor buses will make it easier for seniors to board.

"A stacked deck beat the Tenderloin," said resident activist John Nulty after the vote. "Everyone got a piece of the pie but the neighborhood that the plan is destroying."

One aspect of the \$400,000 plan supplants one-hour time zones on O'Farrell between Larkin and Jones and on Geary between Polk and Jones with 140 parking meters, according to Muni's count. The meters will increase parking turnover, reduce double parking and bring in \$20,000 a year, Muni says. Clock meters on eight of the blocks will start ticking at 7 a.m., two hours earlier than most.

After an hour-plus of public testimony, the MTA board discussed the stops.

"I think I have lived through this before," said Director Shirley Breyer Black, the MTA's elder member. "When a stop was eliminated where I live at Fifth (Avenue) and Lake, everybody wondered how they would get downtown. But they got used to it. I'm no chicken and I can walk 2 1/2 blocks. I walk with a cane now. I think we should give this (plan) a chance."

On the vote to accept the plan, Director Wil Din offered an amendment that would restore the stops if after six months the time savings isn't realized, affirming what Speaks hinted to Senior Action Network could happen. The amendment failed for a lack of second. Then Din cast the only no vote on the plan.

Reaction to the vote rolled slowly out to the neighborhood. Thuc Khuong, director of the Vietnamese Community Center at 766 Geary, said cutting the Larkin/O'Farrell stop in the Little Saigon business district, established in January by the city, would have "a tremendous impact" on residents.

"There are many elderly in that area and their mode of transportation is public," he said. "But I can't say what the effect would be on business."

At the June 4 DPT hearing on the plan, Little Saigon representative Kim Nguyen said most businesses there opposed eliminating the stop.

John Frank, owner of Soups restaurant at 784 O'Farrell for two years, said he sympathized with the elderly and disabled who want to keep the stop. He didn't think his business would be hurt, possibly improved. Metered parking in the 700 block would replace time zones where people now park all day, apparently without being ticketed.

"With meters, the cars will move on and there will be spaces for people to pull in," Frank said. "The meters will clean up the parking situation."

Up on Geary, Houria Hebbbar, whose family has had the Mediterranean-style Dunes Grill for five months, was quite happy to lose the bus stop and get 7 a.m. metered parking in return. "Sure, it'll be good for business," she said, "and for our meat market next door, too."

But farther up Geary at Mason, waitress Zeny Cruz said the 24-hour Pincrest Diner, there since 1969, would suffer, probably more at night. For 10 years she has seen the



John Frank feels sorry for the elderly and disabled but thinks new parking meters on O'Farrell Street might be good for business.

38-Geary drop and pick up the after-2 a.m. bar crowd that stops for a bite before calling it a night. The Pincrest is busy 2-4 a.m., she says, and so is the Jack-in-the-Box across the street.

"After midnight, the 38 is all full," Cruz says. "It's more crowded than the 14-Mission that runs 24 hours, too."

Typical of neighbors affected by the cuts but who did not travel to City Hall hearings during the heat wave to complain was Gilda Todar, 77, a retired city worker who uses the 38 daily. Standing at the Larkin/O'Farrell stop all dolled up in blue coat and hat one sunny Friday morning, she said she was on her way to Powell and Market to catch a connecting line to West Portal.

It's OK for her now to walk an additional block, she said. She's spry enough to dodge sidewalk cracks as she gingerly negotiates the sloping sidewalks down from her 775 Post St. apartment toward Geary.

"I know enough people who can't walk very well and (the cuts) would sure make a difference to anyone not in good shape," Todar says. "I can do it, but it's not easy. I have weak ankles. I don't like it either, but walking is good exercise. It's best to be positive."

She smiles, then adds pleasantly, "It would be better to keep the stops."

As Todar got on the 38-Geary, an elderly Asian man with a cane came scurrying up. With a last-second, limping sprint he barely hoisted himself on board as the bus exhaled a mighty wheeze and pulled away. ■



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Losing a bus stop in front of her family's newly acquired Dunes Grill on Geary Street, says Houria Hebbbar, will be good for business.



It's not easy for many seniors to walk to 38-Geary stops now, says daily rider Gilda Todar at the O'Farrell/Larkin stop. She thinks the five stops should be saved.

PHOTO BY TOM CARTER