

Muni told to restore 2 of the 5 38-Geary bus stops it planned to cut

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It is possible Muni will withdraw the entire plan. Supervisor Matt Gonzalez was curious about Muni's resistance to the slightest fiddling with the stops, the only part of the plan that has seriously been contested. Cutting 25% of the Tenderloin's 19 stops seemed not paying attention to "impact," Gonzalez said. In response to his questioning before the vote, Muni Special Projects Coordinator Joe Speaks said the plan's several elements worked together for an efficiency and it should pass as is. Failing that, he said, Muni would "prefer to go away" and look at how "we didn't do our work," and start from scratch.

The 10 supervisors, sitting as the Transportation Authority, discussed the issue after more than 50 people, in a line that wrapped halfway around the room at the wall, made comments that were fairly evenly divided between pro and con.

Afterward, Speaks declined to comment while nearby Richard Allman, leader of the Save the 38-Geary Stops committee, was receiving congratulations.

MOMENTUM AGAINST MUNI GREW

The Tenderloin had gathered momentum over the past two months and each small victory over the organizational might of Muni seemed to grow. Four weeks before the authority received the plan in November, its Plans and Programs Committee had sent it on with a cautious "no recommendation," a valuation disappointing the two city agencies that took a year to create it.

On Oct. 22, Senior Action Network, representing 30,000 seniors, reversed itself after first approving the plan. SAN came out against the removing the stops and recommended "mitigations" for neighborhood residents "negatively impacted by the service changes."

The second week in December, the Mayor's Disability Council wrote to Mayor Gavin Newsom and the Transportation Authority opposing the cuts. "I ride the 38-Geary every day," council Co-chair Jack Fagan, who lives at Geary and Hyde, told The Extra. "And I see people every day who would be adversely affected. The stops the city would cut still have more boarders than other stops in the city. We oppose the cuts and feel very strongly about it."

As one of four main transit corridors in the city, Geary is the most-traveled with 54,000 riders daily. But bus service on the 38 is notoriously undependable. The Inner Geary plan is phase one of Bus Rapid Transit, which eventually is to lead to light rail transit east of Van Ness.

Besides the cuts, the Inner Geary project will remove a lane of traffic on both Geary and O'Farrell from Polk to Powell, widen the transit-only and remaining lane, create right and left turn pockets, build a number of double-length bus bulbs, extend yellow zones and add 140 parking meters on Geary and O'Farrell. The Board of Supervisors later on Dec. 14 passed the parking meter and tow away no-stopping zone changes affiliated with the plan.

Work on the \$400,000 total project was to have started in November, coinciding with a routine repaving of O'Farrell by the Department of Public Works. But when DPW said its contractor couldn't make the completion deadline before the holidays, repaving was postponed.

THE TRANSIT-DEPENDENT TENDERLOIN

Activists have said the planning by Muni and DPW ignored the character of the Tenderloin. According to an Urban Solutions report, the average San Franciscan is five times more likely to own a car than Tenderloin residents, 44% of whom use transit to go to work, a figure 13% higher than the city average. Residents, many elderly, retired and disabled, also depend on the bus for transportation to supermarkets, medical appointments and to visit other neighborhoods.

In meetings with Muni on Nov. 10 and Dec. 1, 6 and 8, activists suggested two cuts on the Geary line, and rerouting the north-south No. 27 bus line through the Tenderloin for improved connections. Allman, with Diego Sanchez and the brothers John and Michael Nulty, discovered to Muni's embarrassment that the data used to figure the loading and unloading frequency at the five stops came from 1996. But that didn't broker anything, although the meetings did come up with other revelations.

"For the first time," Allman said after the second meeting, "they acknowledged the real impact of their deliberations on the people of the Tenderloin and acknowledged that the planning hadn't been done. We are encouraged."

But the day before the Dec. 14 hearing, Allman had no insights and wasn't sure that Daly could prevail.

"I have no predictions," a weary Allman said. "We've had three public hearings now and four that were canceled. We've been at this a long, long time. Public policy by wearing people out is not my idea of a good approach. And it would have been best if we had been involved at the beginning of Muni's planning. We've all recognized the need to have a neighborhood planning organization." ■



The front desk is the first line of security and a hotel's information hub. Here in the lobby of the Alexander Residence, Rebecca Viera answers tenants' questions.

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Even so, it's not the job it once was. With more private SROs coming on line as approved housing through the mayor's Care Not Cash program, once-seedy flophouses have had to meet code requirements they may have once dodged. Reception-area security demands often result in renovations making hotels safer while brightening dingy lobbies.

Sixteen months ago, the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corp. started its own free desk clerk training program for the residents of its 21 hotel properties.

"It's a workforce strategy for our tenants," says employment and training manager Emylene Aspilla. "We thought, why not maximize the opportunity? We have a good pool that's experienced in their hotel environment and the neighborhood. Others can also apply for our desk jobs, but we give priority to our tenants."

TNDC has had two 12-week training cycles that have graduated 14. About 50% of those who sign up, drop out, according to Aspilla. For the classroom part, nine hours a week, trainees get a \$110 Ross store gift certificate. For the 28 hours of "shadowing" a working clerk at a TNDC hotel, beginning with the February 2005 session they will be paid \$8.50 an hour. A high school diploma or GED is required, as is a criminal background check, although a rap sheet doesn't preclude employment and many SROs don't require a high school education.

"Some have had minimal work experience and all of them won't become desk clerks," Espilla explains. "We coach them and help them find other jobs."

But the biggest trainer is the five-member housing collaborative, which runs a 12-week program three times a year, using the classroom and on-the-job training combination that TNDC copied. The next training starts in January. The Mental Health Association of San Francisco and SHEC also offer two in-services a year run by an outside trainer to advance clerks' skills and

maybe push their hourly wage up a dollar. (See sidebar.) The hotels, too, give trainings on their operating procedures.

"Before, there were just one-day trainings but nothing like this," says Heuson. "Trainees are paid \$8.50 an hour for their on-the-job time and they start at \$9 or \$10." Pay raises are offered for increased skills and longevity. But anything more than \$11-\$12 is rare, Heuson says. Few go on to private SROs, which are usually family-run, she says, and even lower paying.

Since 2001, about two-thirds of the trainees complete the course and two-thirds of the graduates find employment afterward, Heuson says. There are no minimum requirements other than literacy. Thirty from the SHEC program had completed

Behind-the-desk wisdom from a pro

"It's incredibly difficult work that you do," Mike Arraji was saying. "Every day you deal with people on the edge. It's a dicey job."

Arraji is the one who knows. He was on the stage of the Hiram Johnson State Office Building auditorium last July addressing more than 100 men and women. By a show of hands, 75% were SRO desk clerks, most from the Tenderloin and South of Market. They had nibbled on continental breakfast fare in the hallway before coming inside for a few hours of straight talk about tough stuff involving their job.

The occasion was a regular supplemental training for desk clerks sponsored by the Mental Health Association of San Francisco and the Supportive Housing Employment Collaborative. Hotel managers were asked to pay the \$15 cost.

Stocky, swarthy, confident and well-spoken, but not pretentious, Arraji has done 250 of these trainings since 1992. A nurse for 25 years, he currently is a case manager in the South of Market Mental Health Clinic. His topic was Maintaining Safe and Professional Boundaries. The session he did in April, which he does a lot, was How to De-escalate Potentially Violent Situations.

"Your first job is preserving your safety," he says. "Next is the safety of others."

Arraji lectures, with breaks, all morning, inviting questions and laying down a blueprint that if absorbed and applied would produce an intuitive human being of great compassion and competence.

He talked about avoiding panic and hysteria, professionalism,

three years as clerks last July, she says.

"We stay in touch with people who complete the program," Heuson says. "For some it is the first time they have completed something in their whole life. Some haven't completed high school. The people taking the program support each other and develop a sense of community and self-esteem. We graduated 41 in 2003 and had a desk clerk reunion."

Basically, the front desk duties require dealing with the hotel residents and visitors. It puts a premium on attitude and people skills that can inform and educate, plus sooth and placate. Office and telephone skills help.

After a training, the staff continues working with the clerk on a regular basis. They want to retain the employee but they want to help, too, if he or she wants to seek another job.

Communication breakdowns are the biggest problem clerks face along with the pushy visitors who want to bring in visitors with them without following proper procedure. "And there are boundary issues and the need to respect people and to be fair," Heuson says, adding, "There are a lot of stressful situations in this job."

SRO lobbies have seen their share of erratic behavior, and the desk clerk, who knows every resident and their behavior patterns, is the first line of authority. If the clerk can't restore order, the problem is passed to the manager. But no one anticipates disasters like the Dalt Hotel massacre.

On June 28, 2003, resident John Bravard, 53, shot to death three other male residents in the lobby, and critically wounded another. He then went up to his fourth-floor room and killed himself. The clerk witnessing the lobby scene was traumatized. A spokesman for TNDC, which owns and runs hotel, says identifying the clerk for The Extra to interview would violate a "significant privacy issue."

Generally, clerks who like people, can keep safety in mind and are conscientious will do fine in the job, provided they can write a report when necessary.

"There's nothing really hard about it," says Veatrice Buckley, a clerk who in August was working 16 hours a day with shifts at the Dalt and Jordan Apartments. "I love dealing with the public. I know how to do protocol."

Desk clerking was a temporary stop for Buckley, 41, who has a daughter and three grandchildren. Originally from Oakland, she spent 14 years as a nurse's aide in Kern County before moving here in 2001. But she says family and personal problems amounted to spending "38 years of my life battling alcohol." She successfully completed a recovery program at Good Shepherd Grace Center out on Bacon Street in 2003 before taking the clerk training, then landing the \$9.22-an-hour job, which she hopes are a springboard.

"I never gave up," Buckley says. "They say I'm a survivor — I didn't know how severe my problem was. But this keeps me busy and out of the drug and alcohol atmosphere. I do not

respecting everyone, having and using and abusing power, trusting your intuition, the gift of fear, expressing and enforcing your boundaries, guarding against frustration, setting limits, how to say no.

It seemed nothing was untouched.

"More important than what you say, is how you say it," Arraji says, casually roaming the stage as he speaks. "It's never that we communicate too much, it's always that we don't communicate enough."

"Intuition, be in touch with that. Let it help you make decisions. You are the tool that determines whether a situation says peaceful and gets resolved. You've got to be emotionally present, open."

"You will feel at times burned out. It's hard work that you do. You don't want to emotionally shut down or be irritable. It makes things more unsafe. A lot of intuition comes from our bodies. Download, and get

out of the Tenderloin." Someone wants to know about how to deal with elite groups, politics, favoritism from top management.

"I don't have an answer for it," Arraji says. "Ask the property manager for a suggestion on how to handle the problem. Make it his problem. Socrates said the way to educate someone is with questions."

The men and women filed out at the break. They headed for the bathrooms or lingered at information desks or sought coffee. Some of Arraji's wisdom had sunk in for everyone. And they could take pride in the responsibility they shouldered. And to an outsider, their \$9 or \$10 hourly wage never seemed lower. ■

— TOM CARTER

want to go back and daily I see how easy it is to fall back.

"I love the job, but I plan to go further," she adds. "I have paralegal ambitions."

(Efforts to reach Buckley in December failed. Her case worker said she had not been able to reach her for two months.)

For Rebecca Viera, desk clerking became a nice road back to the job corps. The 1994 Heald business school graduate had a good-paying job at State Farm Insurance but quit to care for her ailing grandfather until he passed away.

"Then a friend suggested I would be good in this job and a shoo-in — I have a people-personality — and to apply at TNDC," she says.

She landed the day clerk job at the Alexander Residence on Eddy in May 2003. Now, she is comfortable with the job while being overqualified with her business and computer skills that she doesn't need. She says she is taking her time to "evaluate my possibilities."

Paul Hickman seems to have found his niche as both a residential hotel and SRO clerk. He's a stocky, 55-year-old, former Boston homeless counselor with a GED from Texas who came here in 1995. St. Anthony's and the Tenderloin Housing Clinic helped him find job leads. He has worked at three Tenderloin SROs at various times and a residential hotel before settling into graveyard shift counseling in mid-October at the Madonna Residence. But he continues to freelance as a desk clerk through TNDC and Mercy Housing. He is scheduled to slip behind the desk Christmas Eve at the Dorothy Day residence on McAllister, subbing for Maria Gordon who has been there 10 years.

He says the difference between residence and SRO hotels is that the SROs are "faster-paced." There's a higher turnover of residents and more people through the door. "Guests are like street people," he says. "At times it's more rowdy. But SROs aren't as bad as they used to be with people trying to get in and blocking the doorway area and giving you a bad time. It's gotten better — the TAC force (police unit) moved down here."

"Respect and politeness are important," Hickman says, because "80% of the job is dealing with people and I'm a people person."

No one has ever taken a swing at him, he says, and the toughest thing he had to do, outside of paperwork, happened four years ago. He rescued an elderly woman who fell upstairs in the hotel where he was working and injured her hip. She was moaning in pain while he made her as comfortable as possible before the ambulance arrived.

"You've got to know how to keep a cool head," Hickman says. "But I've been fortunate on my shifts — no critical incidents. I'd like to move up to assistant manager — I'd be a good one — but I'd have trouble with the paperwork."

Despite their training, desk clerks still don't get enough to deal with the more complex situations. At least that was the message coming out of the Hotel Tenants Convention, held Oct. 14 at St. Boniface and attended by 300. The Central City SRO Collaborative's Sam Dodge, who organized the annual conclave, concluded from the tenants' written feedback that clerks should be trained on 5150 situations and procedures, a state Welfare & Institutions code for when a person is a danger to self or others. If police are called on a 5150, they may take someone off to jail or to S.F. General's psych ward.

At the convention, a group of 12 men and women, in a room near the auditorium where Supervisor Chris Daly had earlier made the keynote speech, discussed health issues in SRO hotels. Often clerks don't know who is on medication and who isn't, or what to do in an emergency, they agreed.

One ruddy-faced man recalled having a severe anxiety attack in his hotel lobby and someone — he presumed a clerk — told him to put his nose against the wall and he'd be all right.

"It's not until a crisis that people know (about those with mental health issues)," said Gayle Justice, a social worker. "I've lived in the McAllister for seven years. Just a few months ago the homeless took over. We have six people on staff (as clerks) and no one is there to guide people into the mental health system. We need to make sure someone is there."

Mark Ellinger, resident of a Sixth Street SRO, complained that supportive housing staffs are not trained to deal with residents' mental issues. "We're not freaks," Ellinger said. "There should be a whole bunch of requirements in place, and with testing and licensing, the same for desk clerks."

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