

Every day's an adventure for TL's sidewalk sweeper

Five days a week, from 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., 52-year-old Edgar Dennis drives a seven-foot-long, two-ton street-cleaning monster known to Tenderloin residents as the Rite Aid machine. While this machine sweeps the street, it shoots out a disinfectant that kills sidewalk germs and the stench of urine. Along the way, residents and workers check it out as Dennis cruises by, and some of them are impressed.

At 10:40 a.m. on a recent Monday, Dennis is piloting the machine, which covers one-third of the sidewalk on each pass, up Leavenworth between Turk and Eddy. Two men working on a car at their curbside garage look up at the big purple machine as Dennis drives a straight trail down the inside of the sidewalk.

At the corner of Leavenworth and Eddy, Xavier Dell walks up to Dennis and asks, "Why you got 'Rite Aid' on it?" Dennis explains that Rite Aid donated \$20,000 to the Tenderloin Sidewalk Improvement Program (TSIP).

Dennis quickly turns 180 degrees and heads back down Leavenworth, zigzagging around parking meters and flower boxes to cover the outside of the sidewalk.

Dell, who lives in Tracy and works with his brother in San Francisco, said he had seen the machine before, and that he likes the driver, Dennis, as well as the way the machine functions. If given a choice between the Green Machine, a street sweeper run by the city of San Francisco, and the Rite Aid machine, Dell said he would pick the latter.

"The same dude drives it all the time," Dell remarked.

When this section of Leavenworth is clean, Dennis takes the machine down Eddy, zigzagging through more parking meters and flower boxes. A woman approaches him as he

reaches the corner of Jones and Eddy, and they engage in light-hearted banter.

Now it's time to take the machine back to the loading dock at 201 Turk to stock up on soap and unload the trash it swept up from the street. After Dennis opens the sliding steel door, he drives up to face the dumpster inside of the dock. He hits a switch to lift the hopper at the front of the machine where it collects trash, then opens the hopper, dropping the trash into the dumpster.

The next order of business is refilling the soap, which is contained in a white, plastic, 55-gallon drum, a four-month supply. Dennis mixes a quart of soap with 52 gallons of water, enough to clean four blocks. He cleans seven square blocks daily.

Once a day, he fills up the machine with gas at the Shell station on Franklin and Turk, where he pays the same pump price as everyone else.

The machine, owned by the non-profit TSIP, is dependable, program Coordinator Megan Lim said.

"There's still room for improvement, but at least the sidewalks are much cleaner," she said. "They're not black like they used to be, and they're not sticky."

Before TSIP kicked off, the sidewalks were very dirty, and the city's Green Machine, which looks like an oversized jet ski, couldn't quite handle the job. "The sidewalks were really bad then," Lim said. "The city did what it could, but it wasn't enough."

The machine, made by Minnesota-based Tenant, cost about \$40,000, TSIP board member David Mansch said.

Besides cleaning and sweeping, the machine also rinses the sidewalks and vacuums the

dirty water back inside for filtering. The Green Machine, on the other hand, mainly sweeps the streets and doesn't use soap. It sprays water to keep the dust down, not to clean.

Tenderloin resident Gayle Wood was there on May 19, 1999, at 201 Turk, when Mayor Willie Brown cut the ribbon on the \$200,000-a-year program, signaling TSIP's official start. She says the difference in the cleanliness of the sidewalks is phenomenal. "The [sidewalks] are like night and day," she said.

After Dennis refills the soap tank and dumps the trash, he backs the machine out of the dock and pulls a chain to lower



Edgar Dennis navigates crowded streets as he cleans the sidewalks.

the steel door and shut down the dock. A disturbed man with blond hair walks up to the machine and starts pounding the hopper with his fist.

"I paid for this, mother-fucker!" he shouts. "I pay your allowance!"

Dennis said he often hears things like that. He simply turns the other cheek.

"People babble a lot," Dennis said. "People walk by and make comments. I disregard stuff like that."

The blond man then walks into the intersection of Jones and Turk and slams a glass bottle to the pavement directly in front of an SUV trying to get through the intersection, scaring the female driver.

Dennis said his predecessor was attacked by a man wielding a cane last year, and he's had a full bottle of liquor thrown at him. In a separate incident, a group of people stood in front of the machine to block it, and one of them urinated on it.

"But most people are accommodating," Dennis said. "Most people appreciate [the cleanliness of the streets]."

One resident calls the machine Louise. "He thought it fit the machine," Dennis said. "'Lucille' was already taken, so he named it 'Louise.'"

After the mini-tirade at the SUV, the Rite Aid machine is off and running again. As it goes down Jones, a man pouring himself a drink playfully shouts at the machine and pretends to kick it as it zig-zags past him and turns the corner onto Ellis.

A man picking out potatoes at a corner grocer on Ellis said he liked the machine: "Yeah, it's good, it's clean."

Artie Balmediano, who buses tables at the Taj Mahal Restaurant on Leavenworth and Eddy, called the machine "cool, it's OK," but was frustrated with the inevitable. After the sidewalks are cleaned, peo-

ple mess them up again.

Dennis' last pass before lunch is Turk Street. He cruises past the Up and Away Cafe at the corner of Jones, leaving a straight, wet trail alongside the buildings.

Karen Magnate, who lives in the Tenderloin and works at the Up and Away, said that having clean sidewalks helps to bring in customers. "I don't want to see the sidewalks dirty," Magnate said.

Kerry Clark, who lives at the Aspen Apartments, said the machine "seems to do a great job. . . . You can see where it cleans."

"The driver's cool, too," he said. However, Clark feels the machine makes too much noise and is too big.

"It's really loud," he said. "I'm on the ninth floor, and I can hear it way up there. It sounds like it vibrates the building. You have to walk in the street to get around it."

TSIP board member Mansch said the size of the machine is "actually an enhancement," since it covers more of the sidewalk than other machines. The only problem with its size is that the machine can't get in the places between poles and mailboxes.

TSIP program Coordinator Lim said that TSIP is looking into a new, smaller machine, the Tenant 7100. It weighs only about 1,000 pounds and can clean spots the Rite Aid can't get to. She said she would be hiring someone to operate it.

"That's where the community will have to come in," Lim said.

Leroy Looper, a TSIP board member, said the program needs a new machine so the sidewalks can be cleaned seven days a week, not just five, and that the residents should work together to keep the neighborhood clean.

"Everybody has to help to keep the Tenderloin clean," Looper said. "The community should be cleaned up, and the [residents] should be working to clean it up." ■



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF TSIP



This filth-encrusted Ellis Street sidewalk a problem for TSIP sweeper.



A Jones Street sidewalk after Edgar Dennis got a crack at it.