

Governor puts Leno's healthy food law on back burner

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counter, bean sprouts on top. Ung's fingers fly from item to keys and back. The total is \$9.15. "We sell a lot of bean sprouts," says the 22-year-old San Francisco State student. He works five days a week, and he often speaks Teo Chiu, a Chinese dialect.

The stream of customers is steady, not crowded like on weekends, Ung says. He declines to be photographed and shrugs when asked how many customers he serves each day. He guesses 100, but the seven we counted over a 10-minute period would suggest a higher number.

His employer appears, a handsome Asian woman in a red short-sleeve tunic. She smiles at the questions and bursts into laughter when asked permission to take a photo. And no, she says, they do not have 200 customers a day.

Do her customers ask for items she doesn't have? "No," she says, "I have everything."

The New Chiu Fong Co. has a faded blue awning and ugly silver security screening imposed on its 25-foot storefront. Inside, the store goes back 80 feet, triple the size of Hiep Thanh.

The first third of the store contains an astonishing array of perishables. The rest of the store is dry, bagged and canned goods. But the owner isn't around and no one is talking.

'MY FAVORITE STORE'

It's a different story two blocks away at the Right Way, 596 O'Farrell St. An Asian woman who says she's not from the neighborhood surveys the colorful boxes of peaches, nectarines, cantaloupes, watermelons and mangoes outside, selects a pair of 2-for-\$1 mangoes and goes inside to pay. At the cash register, Kamal Alwadi smiles and says, "We sell everything." "This is my favorite store," says Yves Nicolas, 66. "Very good prices." Nicolas shops at the farmers' market on occasion but never leaves the neighborhood to buy groceries. "Groceries are too heavy to carry," he says. "And this store is good for me. I live in the next block. It's the best. I come here all the time."

Across the street at the Econo Market, Frank Massis is at the cash register, behind him a wide selection of liquor bottles. He owns the Econo, the Right Way and the Mid City over on Geary. At midafternoon business is good but not hectic. He calls customers by name and makes change while talking on his cell phone,

speaking English, Spanish or Arabic. He works 12-hour days, six days a week. He's 35.

Massis bought the Right Way two years ago and in that time says he has increased the fruit and vegetable offerings by 35%.

"The demand was there," Massis says. "It sells. It's good quality and cheap. Did you see? Go look." He points across the street to the Right Way and steps outside for a smoke. "The big stores are closing," he says. "Too much overhead. Do you want something to drink?"

It is unlikely that a chain supermarket will land in the Tenderloin and iffy, at this point, that a smaller, full-service grocer would take the risk, according to an analysis commissioned by TNDC.

The nonprofit, which operates 1,867 housing units in the Tenderloin — 1,211 of them SRO rooms — is seeking a loan from the Mayor's Office of Housing to buy the 22,000-square-foot parking lot at Eddy and Taylor. It wants to build at least eight stories of low-cost family housing.

On the ground floor, TNDC conceptualizes a full-service grocery, which it sees as a major economic development for the neighborhood. The mixed-use project wouldn't be completed before 2012, says Nick Griffin, senior project manager.

TNDC's study by Ventura Partners, concluded in May, said that, given the neighborhood and store size, a "mainstream grocery" wouldn't be interested and that turning the entire 17,000-square-foot ground floor into a market "isn't warranted financially."

The big chains, operating on thin profit margins, require more space — typically 30,000 square feet — and different dem-



Shown are the locations of 24 Tenderloin stores that stock a dozen or more fruits and vegetables, plus the granddaddy of them all, the Heart of the City Farmers Market, the cornucopia at the bottom of the map. Asian food stores are indicated with a leafy logo.

graphics than exist in the city's lowest-income neighborhood. Plus they want lots of parking. Working from a Planning Department list of grocery stores, Ventura interviewed 20 owners but found little interest. Only Evergreen Produce Market, at 2539 Mission St., showed interest. One retail real estate consultant, expert in grocery projects, said it would take a "Herculean effort" to bring a big store to Eddy and Taylor.

But the report did recommend setting aside 5,000 to 8,000 "flexible" square feet for a grocery. Perhaps set it up as a separate deeded parcel to attract a commercial investor. Ventura Partners recommended turning the remaining 9,000 to 12,000 square feet into condominiums, a plus for any grocer-operator wanting the whole space to help secure investment funds.

TNDC invited a select group of residents, business owners and nonprofit employees to a briefing on the Eddy and Taylor report and a discussion at the Ambassador Hotel, 55 Mason St., on July 10. The goal, said Executive Director Don Falk in an e-mail to the group, is to help TNDC decide "whether — and if so how — to proceed at this site."

What could affect the Tenderloin's need for produce is dormant state legislation that's waiting to be funded. San Francisco Assemblyman Mark Leno's measure would give attractive incentives for mom-and-pop grocers in poor California neighborhoods to stock fresh fruits and vegetables, and would give rebates to food stamp holders who buy fresh. But the \$500,000 first-year funding for the pilot program is stymied; Gov. Schwarzenegger didn't put the money in his 2007-08 budget.

The Legislature passed Leno's AB2384 last August. The governor signed it in September.

"Why would he sign a bill if he's not going to put money in it?" asks Ken Hecht of

California Food Policy Advocates in Berkeley. "It's chump change. And this is exactly what he's been talking about. If you stopped him on the street and asked him, he'd say 2384 is great." Hecht blamed the state budget deficit.

The pilot program is aimed at making fresh produce an economical choice in low-income neighborhoods where typically they are less available and more expensive. A diet rich in fruit and vegetables reduces the risk of chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke, as well as certain cancers.

Food stamp-certified grocers aren't required to offer fresh produce and typically don't. And the food stamps benefit — a federal allotment — is only \$2.70 a day, not a sum that promotes health. Leno tried living on food stamps for a week this year to dramatize the inadequacy of the sagging safety net. He said he remained hungry all the time, no matter

what he bought. In San Francisco, two-thirds of those eligible for food stamps aren't signed up, Leno said. In the 94102 Tenderloin ZIP code, the participation rate was less than 18%, according to a December 2004 report from the San Francisco Food Alliance.

Gwen Smith of Literacy for Environmental Justice on June 27 attended the first meeting in Sacramento of 40 grocers, retailers, health department and food stamp officials to discuss the creative details of Leno's Healthy Food Purchase Pilot Program.

The bill is designed after LEJ's Good Neighbor program that's been working in Bayview-Hunters Point since 2003 to reverse the alarming trend that merely 5% of the food sold there was fresh. The program found mom-and-pop grocers willing to stock fruits and vegetables in return for help putting in refrigeration, the funding for which came from donations and S.F. Department of Environment grants.

"Studies show that the first of the month the food stamps go quickly," Smith says, "and by the second week people are not eating healthy. Money can go only so far. The whole idea is that if you buy produce, you get more. So if you buy \$1 worth of produce, you get 60 cents back."

Those figures aren't in AB2384, but they were discussed at the Sacramento planning session, she says. "We are extremely hopeful we'll get the funding." When it comes — presumably before Leno's seven-county pilot project's 2011 repeal date — federal funds will be used at the mom-and-pops to stock, store and market produce. Because



The Right Way grocery on O'Farrell Street attracts loyal residents. One customer finds what he needs here without leaving the neighborhood. Clerk Kamal Alwadi says, "We sell everything."

Leno is from San Francisco, the county should get favored status and Bayview-Hunters Point and the Tenderloin would be first in line for incentives. ■

City College journalism student Doug Ablgren and Study Center Executive Assistant JohnDavid Nuñez contributed to this report.

Farmers market: No expansion

FARMERS Market shoppers at U.N. Plaza seem to want more of a good thing but the market won't likely add another day to its Wednesday and Sunday schedule.

"I shop here at least once a week and I'd do more if it were open another time, an evening maybe — I love it, it's fresh and cheap and the heartbeat of the city," said eight-year TL resident Christopher Hagenmeier. The United Air Lines flight attendant had just bought several bags of produce at one of the four Busalacchi Farms produce stands at the market.

Over by the Cipponeri fruit stand, where the cherries were nearly sold out at 2:15 p.m., Garland Hall, TL resident and manager of the Ambassador Hotel, says he comes to the market at least once a week.

"I could do 75% of my shopping here if I had to," Hall says. "If it were open more, I'd come." Like Hagenmeier, he takes public transportation to shop deals elsewhere.

Christine Adams, the farmers market manager, says she tried 20 years ago to add another day and it didn't work.

"We had a third day, Fridays, and it really interrupted Wednesdays and Sundays," she says sitting in her white van parked on a walkway behind the booths. "It meant we lost half the Sunday business. It cut into Wednesday, too. But now we've got enough."

If all the vendors were selling out, she says, she would consider it. She won't add vendors that sell lunch either, because she doesn't want to compete with local restaurants.

"We had the tamale lady with us before the Mexican restaurants opened around here," Adams said. A taqueria is nearby on McAllister and two more are at Sixth and Market streets.

One other trend occurring is the declining use of food stamps, now the Electronic Benefits Transfer card.

"Most of the business here is low income," Adams said. "A lot of people come with just \$1 or \$2."

The market used to process about \$5,000 a day in the paper food stamps before converting to EBT cards in August 2004. During that summer it processed \$1,000-\$2,000.

"Now it's about a third of that," Adams says. "And I have no idea why." ■

— TOM CARTER

Farmers Market manager Christine Adams (below center) is shown with vendor Julie Phan who has been selling her Tulare and Sacramento County farm fruit at the market since 1884. The first to arrive and the last to leave, Phan hires the homeless to help unload her truck. Photo at the bottom of p. 5 shows a disabled customer purchasing mushrooms at the longtime singular mushroom stand.



PHOTOS BY LENNY LIMJOCO

