

\$1.2 million for 6th St. SROs goes begging

Hotel owners don't apply for free loans from Redevelopment

BY TOM CARTER

THE Redevelopment Agency is canceling \$1.2 million in quality of life improvement loans for private Sixth Street SROs, which have a reputation for being little more than hovels.

The owners asked for the money four years ago but few have applied for it, though the loans were forgivable, meaning they didn't have to be repaid. So the \$1.2 million in improvements would have been essentially free.

The closure is a small step backward for the expensive drive to revitalize the seedy corridor that has seen many improvement programs since 1990 when Redevelopment came in to start earthquake recovery.

In recent years, millions of dollars have been spent on it. Redevelopment created the Plaza Apartments at Sixth and Howard, widened sidewalks and put palm trees on them, gave business start-up and façade improvement loans, a program administered for the agency by the nonprofit Urban Solutions. But the quality of life loan was a separate program.

Tenants, the Central City SRO Collaborative and 15 hotels pushed for the \$25,000-to-\$100,000 forgivable loans in 2002 and Redevelopment put up \$1.9 million for the program. A prime goal was electrical upgrades for the many SROs constructed after the 1906 earthquake. About 30 SROs are in the project area.

"The hotels helped write this but for some reason they decided they didn't want to invest," Mike Grisso, Redevelopment Agency project manager and liaison to the South of Market Project Area Committee, said in an interview.

Five of the original 15 SROs have gotten the loans.

A key reason the Redevelopment Agency Commission approved the program was to offer an incentive for owners to bring their hotels up to code so they could then take advantage of the forgivable loans. Redevelopment Executive Director Marcia Rosen emphasized the point at the commission's March 28 meeting.

"We heard a variety of excuses," Grisso said. "But too much paperwork, I don't buy. They had Urban Solutions to help them. It's disappointing."

A year ago, when it had become obvious that interest was very low, Redevelopment hired Urban Solutions, which contacted all the hotels. But it found the hotel owners didn't want to spend the money to bring their establishments up to code. Eligibility for the free money required having clear title — no pending code violations, liens or judgments.

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CENTRAL CITY

EXTRA

SAN FRANCISCO

EXPLOSIVE BACK STORY



PHOTOS BY TOM CARTER

Francis Gabik (right) talks to his friend Jim Ayers about the bomb that closed Sixth Street.

Behind 6th St. bomb scare

SRO denizen tells how he came to have a live mortar shell in his room

BY TOM CARTER

"I GOT something to tell you," the old man said as he sat on a VA hospital bed. "I should've told you a long time ago."

"Jesus Christ," his friend, Jim Ayers, said, "don't tell me you've got a body stashed back in your hotel room."

"No," he said. "It's worse than that."

"What can be worse than that?" Ayers shot back.

Out came a bizarre story about the 87-year-old's 64-year-old Japanese "hot" bomb that had nestled in his Sixth Street hotel room for decades. The sudden telling of his secret led to the closing of Sixth Street for a few hours on Aug. 22 while the police bomb squad donned their protective clothing and gingerly entered the Lawrence Hotel, where the old man lived. Not long after, they hauled out a metal-encased explosive device.

The old man, Francis Norman Gabik, known as Gabby, had been in the merchant marine during World War II. U.S. troops were island-hopping in the South Pacific, engaged in dirty jungle fighting to wrest territory from the Japanese. Gabby and his merchant marine buddies, stationed on one of the islands, fixed beat-up ships and subs, and spent their off time drinking beer and goofing.

From his VA hospital bed, Gabby started telling Ayers about those times, how the superstitious natives were scared of the caves, how the Japanese had bunkers full of munitions and tunnels with stashes. For recreation in their off hours, the men could paddle rafts to the nearby tiny islands that had been cleared.

A week after the street-clearing bomb scare, Ayers was recalling his conversations with Gabby to The Extra. Ayers was sitting in a doughnut shop on Market Street, still amazed by the turn of events.

During the war Gabby and many merchant marine seamen rented rooms on and around Sixth Street, cheap places they'd come back to after shipping out to sea for awhile. He moved from another SRO into the Lawrence Hotel in 1964. Close by were Pandellis, Kellogg and Fernandez, his drinking buddies at the Frisco Club then below



Police removed a live mortal shell that had been in Francis Gabik's Lawrence Hotel room for 35 years.

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