

## GRASSROOTS FUNDING

**SAN FRANCISCO ADVANCES A HYPERLOCAL MODEL FOR IMPROVING NEIGHBORHOOD GREEN SPACES.**

BY LYDIA LEE

**BELOW**

The GBD nonprofit solicited donations to transform a stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue.

For years, Angel Alley in San Francisco, which leads to the headquarters of the Hells Angels, had a fittingly outlaw aura. Narrowed by half in an expansion of the neighboring municipal bus yard, this section of Tennessee Street was trash-strewn and unmaintained. In 2015, community members used grant money to clean up the alley and hired the landscape architect David Fletcher, ASLA, to design it. Now, gabion walls of concrete rubble, coated with glow-in-the-dark paint for nighttime visibility, define planter beds filled with succulents. And the streetscape is getting regular maintenance, thanks to the neighborhood's green benefit district (GBD), a creative new funding mechanism for city parks.

Over the past year or so, the GBD program has significantly improved the public landscaping within a 70-block portion of the city. Essentially a neighborhood tax, the GBD is a parkcentric twist on a special assessment district (also called a community benefit district, among other names). Regulated by state and local government, they often take the form of special business districts formed by retailers to pay for street cleaning, security, and other communal needs. In San Francisco, property owners in a defined area vote to set up such a district, and a nonprofit organization with an elected board decides how the yearly assessments, which are calculated based on square footage and type of usage, are spent.

"City departments have money and power, but they are huge lumbering things, while advocates at the local level see what the opportunities and needs are," says Julie Christensen, executive director of the Dogpatch & Northwest Potrero Hill Green Benefit District. "The GBD bridges the gap between the two."

Like Angel Alley, nearly all of the streetscapes in the Dogpatch, an evolving industrial area that was not designed with residential amenities, began as the pet projects of resident volunteers. The GBD will help ensure that these ad hoc parks are maintained into the future. With an annual budget that comes to \$600,000 this year, the GBD is able to supplement what the public works department provides with more frequent maintenance, a greater variety of plants, and improved infrastructure (including new exercise equipment, paths, and drainage systems). This year, the group plans to put out an RFP for the redesign of Woods Yard, a block-long park along 22nd Street.

"[The GDB] is a creative, grassroots way of getting parks cleaned up and projects done, and provides a sustainable funding stream," says the economist Margaret Walls, a senior fellow at Resources for the Future, a Washington, D.C.-based environmental think tank. "However, there are potential downsides to this approach: It could possibly create a 'haves and have-nots' situation or encourage the city to allocate funds elsewhere. It will be interesting to see how this plays out in the long term." ●

