

# Derelict plots under freeways in SF could become parklands

By [Dominic Fracassa](#)

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Photo: Santiago Mejia, The Chronicle

The lot at 325 San Bruno Ave., between 16th and 17th streets, is a candidate for conversion into a park.

San Francisco may soon have an opportunity to transform up to 10 gritty, weed-choked plots of land beneath elevated freeways into public parks and recreation spaces, thanks to a state bill now awaiting Gov. Jerry Brown's signature.

The parcels are among 75 in the city owned by Caltrans, which makes about \$9.2 million each year by leasing them out, mostly to private companies that use them as makeshift parking lots or as storage space.

Once those leases expire, the bill directs [Caltrans](#) to give San Francisco the first opportunity to rent each plot at a 70 percent discount to develop into public spaces.

“I think this is a creative way to utilize this mostly vacant land underneath freeways and make them available for San Franciscans to play and recreate,” said San Francisco Assemblyman Phil Ting. “We have such little space for kids and families to go to. Every space not utilized is a waste.” Ting worked with Mayor Ed Lee’s office in crafting the legislation.

### **San Francisco could become first local government to use**

The city would have to foot the bill for building and maintaining the new parks, and the cost of renting the parcels themselves would be about \$1 million per year, city officials said. That may turn out to be a bargain for both San Francisco and for Caltrans, considering the amount of money spent on cleaning and maintaining the debris-strewn lots, many of which, in their current state, have become magnets for homeless camps and crime.

Last year, Caltrans spent \$7.5 million to clear encampments beneath highways statewide last year, according to data from the transportation department. There were around 2,800 encampments beneath or adjacent to freeways cleared in San Francisco last year, and roughly 2,000 crimes were reported.

City officials say converting the lots into public parks and open spaces will also be a critical component of San Francisco’s efforts to meet the requirements laid out by [SB375](#), a sweeping 2008 bill that compelled California cities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through strategic civic planning.

The city has vowed to create more green, open spaces to complement housing construction near transit hubs as part of its effort to comply with SB375. Todd Rufo, director of the San Francisco [Office of Economic and Workforce Development](#), said “unlocking” parcels beneath freeways is crucial, as officials work to build more parks and affordable housing in a city that is rapidly running out of room.

“If we didn’t get this, our choices would be to acquire some buildings, knock them down and then build the parks there,” Rufo said. “That’s space that could have been

more affordable housing, or something else. We thought there was a better way to do it.”

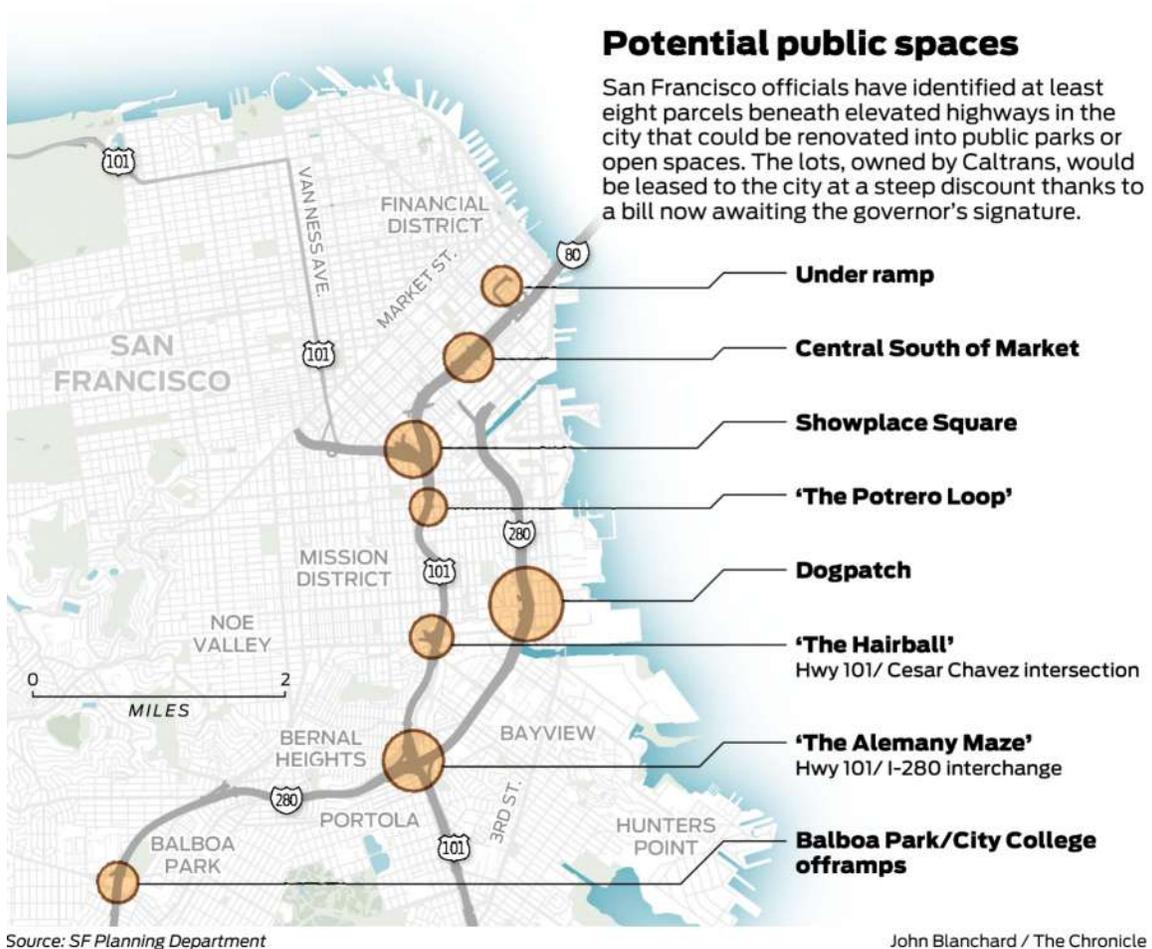
Capping the number of lots the city can lease at 10 was meant to lessen the financial cost to Caltrans and the state, which could be otherwise renting the plots to the private sector at a higher price, city officials said.

The length of the leases will have to be negotiated by the city and Caltrans. Negotiations won't begin until “after Jan. 2018,” when existing leases on the first few parcels expire, Caltrans spokesman Mark Dinger said in an email. All of the lots are currently being leased.

The city already has had some success transforming underused parcels beneath freeways into public spaces, including a skate park and dog-walk area South of Market and a volleyball court in Mission Bay.

Those are just the types of recreational areas that Julie Christensen would like to see more of. Christensen, a former city supervisor, now serves as executive director of the [Dogpatch and Northwest Potrero Hill Green Benefit District](#). She said she's been lobbying the city to create more community recreational spaces in that neighborhood as a way to reunite an area cleaved by Interstate 280 and Highway 101 that's “starving for space.”

“The negative impact of underutilizing that land is so great,” Christensen said. “Not only would we be adding good things, we'd be mitigating some pretty miserable conditions.” As they are now, the lots in the neighborhood have had “enormous problems with camping and fires and dumping,” she said.



San Francisco officials have already identified at least eight possible parcels for redevelopment, should AB857 get signed into law, including lots in the Dogpatch; beneath what's known as the Hairball, where Highway 101 meets Cesar Chavez Street in the Mission District; and underneath the tangled Alemany Maze, where 101 and I-280 converge.

“We’re looking everywhere for more ways to green the city and create places for the public. This is a resource we shouldn’t overlook,” Christensen said. “It could be more transformative than people realize.”



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