Hope is alive in the Tenderloin: What the neighborhood needs now to reverse decades of neglect

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For years, the park on the corner of Turk and Hyde streets had gone mostly unnoticed by the city. Maybe it was the size; the park (more of a playground) takes up less than a quarter acre of San Francisco’s nearly 50 square miles. Or
Finally, in 2012, the park was earmarked as a priority renovation under the city’s “Let’s Play SF” bond. Eight years and $1.7 million later, the Turk-Hyde Mini Park was scheduled to reopen on March 2, 2020. Pratibha Tekkey remembers that date because she made sure to plan her flight to India for the day after the grand reopening. She didn’t want to miss seeing kids fly down the new slide, dangle from the lime-green jungle gym and run across the fresh-laid astroturf.

The park didn’t get any bigger after renovations, but in the Tenderloin, the city’s most diverse and often most neglected neighborhood, small things matter. They add up. Tekkey is a community organizer in the Tenderloin and the director of community organizing for the Central City SRO Collaborative. For her and for others, this small park was one in a string of recent victories. There was the food hall set to take over the long-vacant post office on Hyde Street and the increase in power washing the streets and sidewalks. A market-rate housing project was about to break ground on the neighborhood’s edge, and the Tenderloin Merchants Association had recently formed.

“We felt like things were coming together. You know? Like things are happening. Slowly things are changing, improving for the better,” Tekkey says. “But then the pandemic happened.”
Two weeks after the park opened, the Bay Area began to shelter in place, the playground closed and the number of tents on Tenderloin sidewalks — an imperfect but telling metric of the neighborhood’s health — more than doubled.

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Those numbers have since dropped considerably, but only after significant neighborhood lobbying that culminated with UC Hastings College of the Law joining five other plaintiffs to sue the city over the neighborhood’s condition.

“We’re turning a corner,” says Matt Haney, the San Francisco supervisor who represents the Tenderloin. “I took a walk around the neighborhood this morning and, in many ways, there’s a lot that I saw that’s more positive and hopeful than I’ve seen here in a long time.”

Neighborhood advocates are realistic about this setback and the years of successes seemingly washed away overnight. But, some say, there’s also room for cautious optimism. This moment may be a catalyst for change.

**OUTLOOK METER**

**Cautiously optimistic:** City leaders have long ignored the Tenderloin, but now San Francisco’s most diverse neighborhood has the city’s attention, and advocates are hopeful for its future.

Housing the houseless, taking care of the neighborhood’s most vulnerable — those are just the first steps toward imagining a revived Tenderloin. New trash cans, a farmers’ market, corner stores full of produce, revived playgrounds, neighborhood events, temporary dog runs — small things other areas take for granted — can lead to a neighborhood in bloom, advocates say.

Residents aren’t looking to change the character of the Tenderloin, says Katie Conry, director of the Tenderloin Museum.
neighborhood” where people can get services and “where everyone feels welcome and safe.

“That’s the dream.”

For the first half of the 1900s, the Tenderloin was one of San Francisco’s most vibrant neighborhoods. It was full of vice, sure, but it was also the place to go on a night out. The streets brimmed with theaters and restaurants and bars. Then, around the late 1950s, the city cracked down on the neighborhood’s underground gambling economy and paved over the streetcar lines that ran through it.

The Tenderloin was cut off and abandoned, and yet it found a new purpose. This abandoned neighborhood would offer itself to those who were also forgotten or alone, those who had just moved to San Francisco in search of a home and those who had run out of places to turn. The Tenderloin became a neighborhood of “first access and last resort,” as Curtis Bradford, a neighborhood activist, puts it.

In 1966, two years before New York City’s Stonewall Riots, queer people in San Francisco fought back against police at a late-night diner called Compton’s Cafeteria. A labor movement grew in the Tenderloin, and an affordable housing movement, too. In the 1980s, neighborhood activists pushed through historic policies to fight gentrification, prevent high-rises and protect the Tenderloin’s single-room-occupancy hotels. To this day, those efforts remain a defining success. Pratibha Tekkey, the organizer, estimates that 40% to 50% of the neighborhood’s units are rent controlled. Others put the percentage of below-market-rate housing higher.
This history has meant a neighborhood full of artists and activists and immigrants and families (the Tenderloin is home to more children per capita than any other). This history has built a home for the poor and disabled and

Daldas Grocery is part of a nutrition program at some Tenderloin corner markets to bring more fresh produce into the neighborhood.

Photo: Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle 2015

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“It’s the soul of San Francisco,” says Fernando Pujals, the director of communications for the Tenderloin Community Benefit District. “The values that San Francisco wants to display or present are rooted in the Tenderloin.

“When you think of Saint Francis, the patron saint of the city, and you think of caring for others and nurturing others, you think of the work that so many do every day in the Tenderloin.”

None of this is meant to romanticize the Tenderloin in its current state. None of this is meant to excuse the open-air drug trade, or the hundreds living on the street in the city with the highest density of billionaires in the world. None of this is meant to paper over the fact that Ashok Thapa, the owner of Fish Tail Market on Turk Street, gets fewer customers because his doorstep offers a better home to the homeless than the city traditionally has, or that Marlene Ku is afraid to let her children play outside.

Four years ago, Marlene Ku came to San Francisco with her child to be with her husband. He’d been living in San Francisco for 20 years. They chose the Tenderloin for the same reason many others do: Rent was too high anywhere else. What she loves most about the neighborhood is that she can go to a corner store and find pieces of her home in Mexico. But that’s not enough, she says. She speaks in Spanish as she talks about wanting her children — Emma, 12, and now there’s a sibling, Lynel, 2 — to have “the freedom to play openly without worry.”
What do you think the future of San Francisco will look like? How will the coronavirus pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests change the way we move around the city and use its space?

“Please think,” Ku says, as Lynel cries in the background, “about the families. The children deserve a place where they can play freely with each other.” If she could afford it, she says, she would move.

The solutions, neighborhood advocates say, are not complicated or unattainable. Often, they’re obvious, or even already unfolding.

Del Seymour, a longtime resident known as the unofficial mayor of the Tenderloin, points to the dozens of corner liquor stores that could offer more than sugary treats and booze. Already the Tenderloin Healthy Store Coalition has helped a handful of bodegas convert. Fresh produce takes the place of potato chips and soda. The city could support their efforts.

Most neighborhoods have a decades-long, city-sanctioned plan. The Tenderloin does not. But the Tenderloin People’s Congress (of which Curtis Bradford is co-chair) could help with that. They’ve already drawn a list of priorities,
Katie Conry, of the Tenderloin Museum, is pushing for more activations — community arts programs, performances, events — anything to knit the community together, to offer it space to exist and thrive. She already has a block party series set for August in partnership with the Tenderloin Community Benefit District and Livable Cities. Streets will close to cars and open to residents for art exhibitions and safe entertainment.
Fernando Pujals, of the benefit district, wants to draw youth into planning decisions and revive its lost teen center.

Pratibha Tekkey dreams of open spaces, an alley that becomes a dog run, a parking lot that becomes a farmers’

Britani Salaza, 3, plants her feet after sliding down the slide on the new play structure at the new Turk and Hyde Mini Park on March 5, 2020 in San Francisco, Calif.

Photo: Lea Suzuki, The Chronicle

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Kasy Asberry, of Demonstration Gardens, has spent a decade greening the neighborhood. She’s worked with residents to plant lemon trees on rooftops and the slightest pieces of earth. She imagines vertical gardens scaling walls and patio beds. “We really think the Tenderloin can become the Garden District of San Francisco,” she says. “We want to help people garden wherever they can. Any little corner.”

In the midst of a pandemic, it’s hard to imagine feeling hopeful for a neighborhood that’s been undervalued for decades. And yet, Asberry and others do. “It’s a crazy time to be hopeful,” she says. “But I absolutely feel very hopeful because there are signs of resilience everywhere.”

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In January, the city counted 103 tents in the Tenderloin. By June 5 there were more than 415. A little more than a month later — after community activism and the lawsuit — the number is somewhere around 130. More than 400
Carlitos Vasquez, 6, climbs the play structure at the new Turk and Hyde Mini Park in the Tenderloin that opened two weeks before the Bay Area began sheltering in place.

Photo: Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

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