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Going from gray to green

Neighborhood program helps homeowners replace pavement with drought-resistant plants

By Marisa Lagos

It's a ubiquitous sight in the Sunset District, one that makes some neighbors wince and causes huge problems for the city's elderly sewer system.

Now, Supervisor Katy Tang is hoping to lose this hallmark of the neighborhood: paved-over front yards.

Tang's office — along with the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, Friends of the Urban Forest and the Surfrider Foundation — has embarked on a project to help turn those eyesores into drought-tolerant jewels that not only look good, but also help the city manage its storm water system.

The Front Yard Ambassadors program, started two weeks ago, allows groups of neighbors — a minimum of five per block — to apply for a grant, and, if chosen, receive free landscaping assistance. Residents only have to pay a permit fee, usually about

\$200, and promise to keep up the yard in the future.

Tang, who grew up in the Sunset, said she has watched as the neighborhood became more and more covered in concrete over the past 25 years, and is excited to give people an easy way to turn things around.

"When I was growing up, my block definitely looked different — there were a lot more lawns," she said, adding that her office "gets a lot of complaints, people calling to say, 'Hey, my neighbor is paving over their front yard.'"

"We came up with this program because there have been so many punitive measures in the past and we want to incentivize people to improve their

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Fixing yards

To learn more about the Front Yard Ambassadors program or submit an application, visit www.sfbos.org/index.aspx?page=15348

Top: Sunset District resident Gail Secchia stands in her yard, which she improved with help from the Front Yard Ambassadors program.

Above: Secchia, a trained horticulturist, tends to a succulent in her front yard.

BAY AREA

Turning yards from gray to green

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neighborhood," Tang said.

In its first year, the \$85,000 program seeks to replace 2,500 square feet of concrete on six to 10 Sunset District blocks with drought-resistant, landscaped yards. On Feb. 22, Tang and dozens of volunteers pitched in to plant new front yards on three blocks, including the 1700 block of Ortega Street, across from the commission's Sunset District Reservoir.

Leading the effort

Gail Secchia, who has lived on the block for 35 years, led the effort to bring the program to her corner of the neighborhood. Secchia, who is trained as a horticulturist, said she was delighted to help bring the greening to her block.

She already had succulents and other low-water plants outside, but through the program was able to expand the garden into a large patch she now shares with her next-door neighbor. That work alone — digging up and hauling away the concrete, fixing the soil, buying plants and mulching — would have cost them \$2,000 to \$3,000, she said.

'A win-win situation'

"It's a win-win situation, because there's so much concrete in the Sunset ... which looks terrible. It's blight," she said. "To me, I want everything green — I work more on the outside of my house than inside."

Secchia said the planting event also accom-



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Gail Secchia, 35-year Sunset District resident

plished another one of Tang's goals: building community. She met two neighbors during the process that she is now friendly with, she said.

Tang's office is now accepting applications for the next round of

grants. When the first \$85,000 has been spent, an estimated 30,000 gallons of rainwater will be kept out of the city's sewer system each year — 12 gallons annually for each square foot of concrete that is replaced.

That's important because the aging system doesn't separate sewage from storm water runoff, so when it rains, it can be overburdened, forcing the city to discharge its overflow into the bay and ocean.

Even if it's not overburdened, a reduced flow into the system means savings for taxpayers because the city has to treat less water, said Tyrone Jue, a spokesman for the commission.

Additional benefits

There are some other, more fun, benefits as

well, Tang said: In addition to beautifying the neighborhood, the program will educate people about what plants will thrive in each of the Sunset's microclimates, and help people to meet their neighbors. Doing entire blocks at a time will make the changes more noticeable, she said — hopefully sparking more interest — and it makes the investment more efficient.

On Secchia's block, it's impossible not to notice the change, she said.

"We already have a park across the street,"

Gail Secchia walks along her block in the Sunset District. Secchia hopes more neighbors will follow her lead and replace the concrete with natural front yards.

Secchia said, gesturing to the lawn and trees adjacent to the reservoir, "but now, with this, we have one of the nicest blocks in the Sunset."

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