



PHOTO: RORY McNAMARA

Merchants say this part of Haight Street desperately needs a toilet to serve the hundreds of thousands of shoppers who visit the area annually, but some residents say the proposed commode is too close to homes and would create quality-of-life problems.

Haight toilet: Too close to homes?

Merchants, residents split on proposal; supervisors to decide

By Edith Alderette
NEIGHBORHOOD REPORTER

To the joy of Haight Ashbury residents and merchants — and the dismay of some Cole Street neighbors — Haight Street may finally get its new toilet.

Yesterday, the Board of Supervisors weighed in on whether to allow a section of sidewalk on Cole, just off Haight, to be widened to allow for a new JC Decaux self-cleaning toilet.

The proposal was forwarded to the full board last week by the board's Transportation and Land Use Committee, which heard passionate pleas from those who support the placement and others who said that the location was too close to homes.

Last week's meeting marked the second time in the last month the committee considered the proposal for the controversial commode. On October 24, temporary committee chair Supervisor Leland Yee sent the measure back to its sponsor, the Department of Public Works, for more community "consensus building."

This time, Yee was absent, and chair Supervisor Leslie Katz and committee member Michael Yaki voted to forward the measure to the full board without a committee recommendation.

Merchants' support

At last week's meeting, Haight Street merchants told Katz and Yaki that they desperately need-

ed a new commode on Haight to serve the hundreds of thousands of tourists and shoppers who visit Haight Street annually.

"We're turning away 40 or 50 people a day who want to go to the bathroom," said Gary Frank, whose business, the Booksmith, would be next door to the new toilet. "If I have to tell somebody, 'No, you can't use our bathroom,' they [leave] immediately."

Though Cole Street neighbors agreed that a Haight Street lavatory was needed, they feared placing it mere feet from homes would draw Haight Street's endemic prostitution, drug dealing, and squalor farther into their residential area.

"Usually the toilets around

that area are not used to [relieve] yourself, they're used for drug use and, unfortunately, for sex," said Lidia Rodriguez, a resident of Cole Street.

Since 1995, the neighborhood

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PHOTO: RORY McNAMARA

A toilet like this one was installed in 1995 at Haight and Masonic streets but was never hooked up to utilities due to complaints that the facility was too close to an elementary school and would present a safety hazard for young children.

TOILET: Haight Street proposal debated

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has wrangled with the issue of the placement of the toilet. According to Jake Szeto of the Department of Public Works, the Cole Street location was identified as the ideal location after an extensive examination of a half-dozen locations on Haight.

The process was hampered by department requirements for toilet placement. The facility could not be installed directly on Haight because its 12-foot-wide sidewalk is too narrow. Sidewalks sporting JC Decaux toilets must be a minimum of 15 feet wide.

In addition, because any stretch of sidewalk chosen for the toilet would require modifications, the site would have to contain a minimum of underground utilities.

Finally, and most problematic, nearby property owners and tenants would have to be amenable to having a toilet placed nearby.

At October's hearing, Szeto said that the department thought in 1995 that it had found a solution when it installed a toilet at Haight and Masonic Avenue. The lavatory was placed, but before

the city could hook it up to utilities, public complaints of its proximity to William R. DeAvila Elementary School forced the city to remove it.

Since then, he said, the only site found to meet all requirements was the Cole Street location.

Last and best chance

Neighbors in support of the location said that, after so many attempts and so much work, the Cole Street site was the last and best chance to get a toilet on Haight.

"We desperately need a toilet and are fully convinced this is our last chance," said Karen Fishkin.

Cole Street residents say that, despite supporters' insistence the Haight and Masonic site won't work, they still prefer that site. The toilet, they pointed out, was placed near an unused door in the back of the school and posed little threat to children.

"The Haight Street location at DeAvila [Elementary] is the right place for this. It's the least expensive place for this, and it's the one that meets the neighbor-

hood's needs," said Ted Loewenberg of the Waller Street Association.

But even though the entrance is not used by children, school officials said last week, they oppose the Masonic location.

"Yes, there was a toilet near our school, and for obvious reasons we don't want that to happen," said Karen Mason, president of DeAvila's parent-teacher association.

Despite the overwhelming agreement that Haight Street needs a new toilet, Yaki said, he had his doubts that the Cole Street site offered the best solu-

tion and hoped to resolve it further at a hearing of the full board.

Supervisor Sue Bierman, who spearheaded the effort to bring the facility to the area, said she saw no other solution and encouraged fellow supervisors to support the proposal.

"There's no doubt that the stores on Haight Street can't handle, and shouldn't have to handle, the needs for a toilet by mostly people coming from other areas," she said.

Results of the full board meeting were unavailable by press time.