



Better signs pitched for privately owned slices of green in sea of gray

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People walking around San Francisco's downtown are likely unaware they are missing out on enjoying a variety of unique public spaces.

But that could change under a proposal being voted on Thursday by the Planning Commission to require uniform and noticeable signage for what are known as privately owned public open spaces, sometimes referred to as POPOS.

Ensuring people know about the open spaces has been a focus of the public policy think-tank San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association. In 2009, the group wrote:

“Unbeknownst to many, downtown San Francisco has a rich and diverse network of privately-owned public open spaces in the form of plazas, atriums, terraces and small parks that support the city's more well-known public park system. Fortunately, for downtown workers and residents, these privately owned spaces make up for the lack of more publicly provided open space downtown.”

Before 1985, downtown developers created public spaces in exchange for permission to build more densely or as a condition of approval for projects. But with the adoption of the 1985 downtown plan, developers started being required to provide public open space “to provide in the downtown quality open space in sufficient quantity and variety to meet the needs of downtown workers, residents and visitors.”

SPUR has identified 45 such pre-1985 spaces, mostly urban gardens and very small snippets of land, and 23 that have been built since then.

The group said “insufficient and deficient signage” is the “most glaring defect in the implementation of the open space requirements.”

These public open spaces “are usually small or tucked away inside, on the back, or on the roof of buildings. These characteristics might create an impression that the space is private and only to be used by building occupants,” a staff report for the Planning Commission said.



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Oasis: A site at 100 First Plaza is one of many downtown spaces of privately owned land created by developers for public use.

The legislation creating the sign regulations was introduced by Board of Supervisors President David Chiu. The Planning Department staff recommends applying the proposed sign regulations to all the existing privately owned public spaces, not just new ones, and requiring compliance within one year. The signs would include a POPOS open-space logo, the hours the site is open; and information on amenities such as bathrooms, number of seats; food served and ADA accessibility. Signs would have to be located within 5 feet of spaces on sidewalks or by pedestrian entrances.

The proposal would ultimately require approval by the Board of Supervisors to go into effect.

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