

San Franciscans Will Vote On Street's Touch of Flash

By JESSE MCKINLEY

SAN FRANCISCO — Can neon save a neighborhood?

On Tuesday, San Francisco voters will try to answer that question when they take up a ballot proposition that, if passed, would allow a down-and-out two-block area of a central city thoroughfare to be ringed with a variety of electronic marquees, bringing a touch of Times Square to a city better known for its painted Victorians.

The measure, Proposition D, sponsored by a local developer, David Addington, would create an "arts revitalization and tourism special sign district" along part of Market Street, which runs from the San Francisco Bay to the hills west of the Castro district. The bill would exempt 52

buildings along the two blocks, an area about 1,800 feet long, from a current voter-approved ban on new billboard advertising. It would also allow building owners to lease the signs to outside advertisers.

Mr. Addington, who owns two of the 52 buildings on that strip, known as Mid-Market, including the Warfield Theater, says he came up with the idea while looking at old photos of the area, which effectively connects the shopping friendly Union Square district with the area surrounding City Hall.

"When you begin to look at historic pictures and look at what it is now, what you notice is the lack of signage," Mr. Addington said.

If passed, he said, his proposition would also offer incentives to lease space to arts organizations. In theory, those arts groups would draw committed audiences and other people to the area.

"We're just looking for something to make it look like an arts and theater district," he said. "We want to make people feel safe, and that in turn gives retail a boost."

Opponents say the plan is deeply flawed and opens the door for gaudy rooftop signs, potentially blunting future restoration efforts.

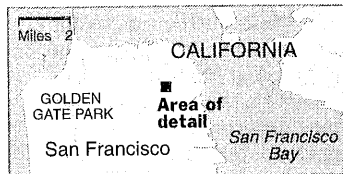
"You're going to have a blighted area with a new, brightly lit blight," said Milo Hanke, the board president of the preservationist group SF Beautiful. "Do you really want to rent a quality apartment that looks on to a blazing billboard."

What both sides agree on is that help is needed for Mid-Market, which serves as a border be-



HEIDI SCHUMANN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

San Franciscans will vote Tuesday on a proposition that would exempt 52 buildings along a run-down, two-block stretch of Market Street from a ban on new marquee advertising.



THE NEW YORK TIMES

A developer hopes bright lights will help the Mid-Market area of San Francisco.

tween the city's Tenderloin district, which has an entrenched drug and homeless problem, and its sometimes scrubby SoMa (or South of Market) district. On Sunday morning, dozens of haggard looking people populated the Mid-Market blocks, apparently trying to extend their Halloween celebrations. Empty liquor and beer bottles and empty stares were in abundance.

Remnants of the blocks' past life as an arts hub do remain, including the Broadway-style Golden Gate Theater where a revival of "South Pacific" just finished a run. But most retail businesses trend toward instant gratification, whether ragged doughnut shops or the clothing-optional Market Street Cinema, which is currently advertising a "Thanks-

giving like no other." The few signs that line the street usually advertise liquor stores, cheap electronics or check-cashing establishments.

Mr. Addington's proposal is not the only one intended to revitalize Mid-Market. Recent efforts have included a pilot plan to divert traffic off Mid-Market with an eye toward creating a future pedestrian mall. A public art project recently spruced up several empty storefronts, adding some color and creativity to the otherwise depressing landscape.

Supporters, including a majority of the city's Board of Supervisors and recently Mayor Gavin Newsom, say that a major advantage of Proposition D is that it would require no public money or new taxes. The proposition would

also channel some money from advertising to youth programs in a budget-crunched city.

And although the successful restoration of Times Square is no doubt an inspiration, Mr. Addington says that his proposed signs would be smaller than Times Square's and possibly coordinated to alert passers-by to coming shows and last-minute deals on tickets.

"I think it could look cool as all get out," he said.

Opponents have also raised the issue of Times Square, noting that there is no guarantee that the signs would not simply advertise the newest type of sneaker or latest fast-food craze.

"San Franciscans," Mr. Hanke said, "believe that one Times Square is enough."