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## SF leather district plans historical sidewalk markers

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Wednesday Sep 23, 2020



A rendering of one of the leather district plaques pays homage to the former locations of Worn Out West and Stormy Leather at 1558 Howard Street. Photo: Courtesy Leather & LGBTQ Cultural District

At one point in time there were at least 50 businesses catering to the leather and LGBTQ community located in San Francisco's South of Market neighborhood. So many gay bars and bathhouses in the 1970s operated on or near Folsom Street, a main artery through the area, that it was known as the "Miracle Mile."

But the onset of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s soon would diminish SOMA's leather scene. The health crisis resulted in most gay bathhouses and sex clubs in the area closing their doors.

By the 1990s, gentrification of the neighborhood began to push out the remaining gay bars, with only a handful left in business today. Further development in the area over the last two decades led community and city leaders to designate a portion of western SOMA as the Leather & LGBTQ Cultural District in hopes of preserving it as an LGBTQ neighborhood.

Now, district leaders want to revive memories of those businesses lost to time and recognize those remaining by placing up to 50 bronze plaques in the sidewalk near where they operated or currently are located. Such storied establishments as the Folsom Street Barracks, The Arena,

Ramrod, The Brig, and the Club Baths of San Francisco would be memorialized with historical markers.

Plaques would also be installed in front of existing businesses such as the SF Eagle, which now fronts the new Eagle Plaza public parklet honoring the leather community built out of a portion of 12th Street at Harrison, and The End Up nightclub at the corner of Sixth and Harrison streets. One would also be located at the former home of the Bay Area Reporter at 395 Ninth Street, which the weekly LGBTQ newspaper called home from December 1988 until October 2013.

The estimated \$120,000 price tag for the plaques is coming from local developers of projects in the area who are required to pay for community improvements as part of their permit approval process. The cultural district is collaborating on the sidewalk markers with the city's arts commission, Public Works Department, and the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency.

It is asking District 6 Supervisor Matt Haney, who represents SOMA, to introduce a resolution in support of the project in October and hopes to present the concept and plaque design to the city's arts commission by November.

A community advisory body that oversees how the developer fees are spent will also need to sign off on the plaque proposal. Some of the sidewalk markers could be installed as soon as next summer in conjunction with a streetscape project the city has planned for Folsom and Howard streets expected to break ground next year.

"The main goal is we want to commemorate a lot of the iconic and historic locations in the district that are no longer around and we are trying to use the sidewalk plaques to preserve recognition of our history," said Robert Goldfarb, chair of the leather district's board. "I think it will be an excellent opportunity to bring people to the district and highlight our history."

The project is similar to one undertaken several years ago by the Top of Broadway Community Benefit District (<https://www.ebar.com/news/news//255467>) in the city's North Beach neighborhood. It has installed sidewalk markers at the site of historic businesses in the city's Italian district, including a trio of LGBTQ nightlife spots shuttered decades ago.

A number of historic SOMA leather businesses have already been memorialized on stone plinths in the San Francisco South of Market Leather History Alley. Dedicated three years ago, the side street project spans Ringold Alley between Eighth and Ninth streets and sports bronze bootprints embedded in the sidewalk honoring various leather community leaders, some of whom owned the remembered businesses.

There has long been interest in learning about the various leather and LGBTQ establishments in SOMA. The late college professor Eric Rofes, a gay man who studied the city's gay male culture, led popular walking tours of the neighborhood in 2005, believed to be the first such walks down SOMA's leather memory lane.

Over the ensuing years others have created their own history walking tours and site-specific performance pieces honoring SOMA's queer past. Once installed, the sidewalk markers will allow people to take their own journey through the neighborhood's history.

In conjunction with the leather district plaques will be self-guided walking tours the cultural district plans to host on its website. There will be audio components in addition to write-ups about the various locations.

"We want to have a number of different options available, whether thematic or location based, or current businesses versus historic ones," said Goldfarb. "We are expecting to have a number of different options available for walking tours."

The plaque designs feature the leather district name under its logo of a chain circle, the name or names of the businesses and the years they operated at the location, and the address. The leather district's board is working with historians to verify the information for the proposed plaques.

In addition to their installation, the district is working with the city on also having the red, black, white, and blue colors of the leather flag be incorporated onto light poles and other street infrastructure that will be installed along Folsom and Howard streets next summer. A new leather flag has been ordered to replace the tattered one flying above the Eagle Plaza and should arrive next month, said Goldfarb, who is also president of the Friends of Eagle Plaza group.

To learn more about the sidewalk markers project and participate in a survey about it, visit <https://sfleatherdistrict.org/2020/09/11/plaques/> (<https://sfleatherdistrict.org/2020/09/11/plaques/>)

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