

On Prostitution in San Francisco

Going after massage parlors

[Editorial]

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For too long, sex trafficking in San Francisco had an unwitting ally: the city's tangled bureaucracy, which failed to crack down on phony massage parlors operating behind neighborhood storefronts.

The confusion could end if a package of reforms gets the attention and political support it needs from the Board of Supervisors. **Supervisor Carmen Chu** and Mayor Gavin Newsom are backing a series of changes to get several agencies working together to shut down prostitution operations masquerading as massage services or health clubs.

At issue are the shady business operators who recruit women, many from Asia, and force them into the sex trade. Of some 150 massage businesses, police estimate 50 are brothels.

The suggested changes won't shutter all these illicit businesses overnight. There's more the city could do if it had more money for inspectors beside the single Public Health Department employee now delegated to enforcing regulations.

But in a budget-crunch year, the proposed reforms will have to do. The overall intent is to put police, planning and public health on the same page instead letting each follow a confusing game of buck-passing that now passes for enforcement.

Fines for repeat offenses would rise from \$1,000 to \$2,500. Businesses and landlords would be mailed notices of infractions such as operating without a permit, employing an unlicensed masseuse, remaining open past a midnight deadline, or allowing scantily clad employees to greet customers.

Until now, one problem area was the Public Health Department hearing process. The department oversees basic health and safety issues, meaning it did little about vice complaints from police who made arrests for solicited sex. Under the new rules, police reports could be used by health officials as grounds to suspend or revoke a massage license.

The planning department would join in by requiring a wide-ranging conditional use hearing and giving neighborhood notice if an existing business such as a nail salon or health club seeks to add massage work. One possible rule: clear-glass store fronts in place of the walled-off facades used to shield the sex trade inside.

The overhaul is restrained in one respect. The changes aren't intended to crack down on the masseuses themselves. The aim is fixed squarely on the operators, not women obliged to enter the sex trade under threats of violence or financial duress.

This exploitation draws easy and frequent condemnation from political leaders, but a genuine crackdown hasn't followed. City finances, legal delays and a confused bureaucracy have taken a toll in San Francisco.

The proposed changes are a modest step toward solving the hidden-away but real problem of sex exploitation. The board should approve new rules for massage parlors.

The intent of new legislation proposed by Supervisor Carmen Chu and Mayor Gavin Newsom is to put San Francisco police, planning and public health on the same page in stopping sex trafficking in the city's massage parlors. A genuine crackdown is long overdue.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/03/31/ED4516PG7T.DTL>

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