

Newest S.F. supervisor's bill would encourage more outdoor dining

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It is not every day that San Francisco's leaders vote to lower fees for businesses - it happens less frequently, perhaps, than even a federal indictment of a sitting member of the Board of Supervisors.

But Wednesday, a Board of Supervisors committee voted to do just that on legislation from Supervisor Carmen Chu, who 11 weeks ago replaced suspended Supervisor Ed Jew after he was charged with a federal crime.



Laura Morton / Special to the Chronicle

The legislation would significantly cut the cost of permits for restaurant and cafe owners to place tables and chairs outside their establishments by decreasing the amount of time city employees must take to approve the permits.

"I like this legislation because if we are able to be more efficient in what we do as a city, we should pass along the savings to businesses," said Chu, as she walked along Columbus Avenue in North Beach, the portion of the city with the highest concentration of cafes and restaurants with sidewalk seating.

By allowing business owners to renew permits online and by having city inspectors checking the permits when the businesses are actually open, the city is able to lower the annual permit fee by as much as \$327.

It was the first substantive piece of legislation introduced by Chu, who is earning high praise from constituents and colleagues for taking on her new role with gusto and with a quiet seriousness that has helped calm the circus atmosphere created by Jew.

Chu, 29, was appointed as interim supervisor of District Four by Mayor Gavin Newsom - after working in his administration's budget office for three years - and there were questions of whether she would be a rubber stamp for the mayor. She is the youngest supervisor, but she has shown a streak of independence, and some people are now saying she should consider a future in politics.

"She's finding her own way and marching to her own drummer," said board President Aaron Peskin. "Clearly her intent is hearing what the people of San Francisco have to say."

Supervisor Bevan Dufty, who is co-sponsoring the legislation with Chu, said she is "doing a stellar job," adding that she is, "a tremendously calming presence and has put the focus back on the nuts and bolts concerns of Sunset residents."

Chu has become a fixture at community meetings in her district, often bringing pastries to early morning gatherings and taking leftovers to her City Hall office to share. Before Thanksgiving, she spent part of a day handing out free turkeys at a food bank in the Sunset.

"I had more face time with her first week than in the whole time Ed (Jew) was in office," said Susan Suval, chair of the Sunset Neighborhood Coalition, an organization of nonprofit groups in the neighborhood.

Chu is becoming more ingrained at City Hall, too, where this week she was appointed to the Public Safety Committee, her third appointment since taking the job in September.

So far, she has voted to authorize the city to issue identification cards to any city resident - regardless of immigration status - but has cast votes against increasing the public funding in races for supervisor and against spending \$100,000 to send relief to victims of a hurricane in Nicaragua.

When the board returns from a break in January, Chu will face a major policy decision in deciding whether to vote for a measure that would amend the City Charter to mandate the city spend approximately \$2.7 billion over 15 years on affordable housing.

Newsom opposes the measure, but Chu said she has not made up her mind.

"I'm really taking the time to weigh both sides of it," said Chu, citing the need for affordable housing, her budget background and the limitations the measure would place on discretionary spending of lawmakers. The measure would result in fewer discretionary dollars in the budget because a chunk of that money would be set aside for affordable housing.

She's often coy about taking a definitive stand on an issue before a vote and hesitates to place blame on other city officials for things like not anticipating the influx of homeless people in the Sunset District following a crackdown on camping in Golden Gate Park.

"I think it's important we make sure the parks are safe. What we're doing now is making sure we're not just looking at parks - people are expressing fair and legitimate concerns," said Chu, who met with police and department heads on the issue Wednesday and has scheduled a public meeting on the topic for Monday.

Despite the unusual circumstances that brought her into politics, Chu has not been a political target of the backers of Jew or those of Ron Dudum, who came in second to Jew in the November 2006 election and had called on Newsom to appoint him to the office after suspending Jew.

The lack of contention and the slow going of Jew's various legal proceedings could be a political boon to Chu, said David Lee, executive director of the Chinese American Voter Education Committee.

"The longer this drags on, the stronger I think Carmen's political future becomes," Lee said.

Some constituents in her district may welcome that. Dallas Udovch, the president of the Taraval-Parkside Merchants Association, said he has been impressed with Chu from the start.

"She really rolled up both sleeves and got dirty," Udovch said. If she continues as she has, Udovch said he would support her taking over the job permanently.

"She's not as seasoned as the other supervisors," he said, "but one thing (she's) got is moxie."

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