

STARK
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49ers again see edge-rusher
depth lacking after injury.
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SAN BRUNO USES
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SHOW WON'T
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Hip-hop festival canceled
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San Francisco Chronicle

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Photos by Stephen Lam/The Chronicle
The housing development on 300 Octavia St. in San Francisco was damaged during a 2023 four-alarm fire and has remained blighted. Since then, neighbors have reported that squatters may have moved in.

Squatters renew neighbors' fire fears

Previously burned building left 'abandoned and unsecured'

By J.K. Dineen

A year after a suspicious fire engulfed a half-built condo complex in San Francisco's Hayes Valley — damaging two adjacent structures and leaving a dozen people homeless — what remains of the building has become a refuge for squatters, raising fears that the property could once again become a fire hazard, according to neighbors.

On Tuesday, a group of Hayes Valley residents descended on a director's hearing at the Department of Planning and Economic Development.

Fire continues on A10



The Hayes Valley Neighborhood Association president says there is evidence of people living on the property.

Architectural 'jewel' betrays S.F.'s struggle

There's plenty to see at the corner of Grant Avenue and California Street, what with a cable car stop and focused bay views, the theatrical splendor of 1008's Sing Chong Building and Old St. Mary's Church with its brick walls that date back to 1853.

No wonder it's easy to

JOHN KING
URBAN DESIGN

skim past the three-story glass office building at 675 California St.

Which is a good thing these days.

For all the attention that gets paid to the obvious signs of downtown San

Francisco's post-pandemic struggles — everyone knows that Nordstrom closed and Macy's is packing its bags — lingering scars like this one, in some ways, make me saddest of all. Four years after COVID derailed Union Square and the Financial District, it's hard to walk by the battered

buildings and vacant storefronts and imagine a scenario where things improve for the better, en masse, anytime soon.

The scene at 675 California is even more painful because, until 2020, the elegantly discreet rectangle was one of those unexpected delights that give

King continues on A9

Insurance crisis hits S.F. homeowners

More repairs being required; agents fear collapse of mortgage deals

By Carolyn Stein

San Francisco resident Rudy Ragan could not believe it when his insurer of nearly 27 years, Safeco, dropped him over puddling on his Sunnyside roof. His own climb onto the roof turned up no problems, and he said the company did not send an inspector — just used aerial imagery.

"Never expected it in my life," said Ragan, who eventually found a different insurance plan — at more than double the price.

Like Ragan, many San Franciscans are astonished to discover that the insurance crisis, with its ever-growing list of nonrenewals, extends far beyond rural California. Within the city, roofers and electricians report increasing



Lea Suzuk/The Chronicle

Steve Simon, who rents a condo in the Dogpatch neighborhood to his family, saw an 11% rise in association dues after the building's master insurance policy jumped from \$19,090 to \$41,652.

numbers of calls in recent months from homeowners told by their insurers to make repairs or replacements. Real estate agents have gone on alert, fearing that mortgage deals will fall through in the absence of insurance. And the number of San Franciscans enrolled in the California FAIR Plan, the high-cost insurer of last resort for the state, has suddenly ballooned.

"Within the last nine months to a year, we started to hear more" about insurance, said Supervisor Abhishek Salaf. People are calling to report that their insurance companies are threatening to drop them unless they make upgrades, he said.

Sometimes, the reason for non-renewal has nothing to do with maintenance. That was the case

Insurance continues on A8

Residents split on fate of Great Highway

Prop K foes raise congestion worries; supporters see 'transformative' park

By Ko Lyn Cheang

Two rallies Saturday presented dueling visions for the fate of the Great Highway, San Francisco's coastal boulevard at the center of a debate about how the city uses its streets and whether parks or cars should dominate.

Voters will decide the future of a 2-mile stretch of the city's westernmost oceanfront road in November. Proposition K would ban private vehicles on the Upper Great Highway between Lincoln Way and Sloat Boulevard for good, turning it into a "transformative" park for pedestrians and cyclists, supporters say. For the past three years, the road has been closed to traffic on weekends on a trial basis.

"Closing (the highway) is not feasible, is not a good idea, and it wasn't brought as a community-led compromise," Sunset District resident Albert Chow, owner of Great Wall Hardware, said to a crowd of about 35 community members on Market Street.

Just two hours later, about 80 community members at a Panhandle Playground rally listened as Sunset resident Josh Kelly called the campaign to create a Great Highway park "part of a long tradition of San Franciscans reclaiming space in their city for people

Highway continues on A10

Mount Olympus another mystery in city's vast lore

Mount Olympus may be San Francisco's biggest anticlimax.

The hilltop mini park in the center of the city rests at the dead end of a winding road, just above 17th Street between Tank Hill and Buena Vista Park. But it remains invisible until it's right in front of your face. The imposing climb to the landmark — 300 feet of elevation from the nearest Muni Metro stop — includes at least two spots where you think, "This can't possibly be the right way."

Then, when you reach the end of your urban hike — thankful for the invention of GPS and smartphones — there's a meticulously landscaped foundation, with stone staircases and ramparts leading up to a massive, 15-foot-tall stone pedestal. On the top of that pedestal is ... absolutely nothing.

No statue, no dedication, no explanation. The only clue that anything once graced the vacant platform is faded etching on the stone. Just one word remains, worn by time into an incomplete

Hartlaub continues on A9



INSURANCE

From page A1

for Monterey Heights resident Betty Dvorno, whose home was dropped by Safeco, a Liberty Mutual subsidiary, due to her home being located in an area that is “too densely concentrated,” which means that the company had too many policies in her area.

A Safeco spokesperson previously told the Chronicle that the company limits the number of policies it writes in any given area to make sure it isn’t disproportionately impacted in the event of a multi-home disaster.

The situation left Dvorno and her caretaker, Nancy Reilly, scrambling to find a new insurer. Together, the pair spent hours figuring out different options and even counting how many feet Dvorno’s home was from the nearest fire hydrant.

“They’re treating us as if we’re in a rural, nonpopulated, dense area,” Reilly said.

No single area of San Francisco stands out as the most affected, said Brian Sullivan, a broker with Avail Insurance Solutions. But issues raised by insurers in the city include maintenance of older homes and proximity to parks, which in Sullivan’s view could be due to more cautious wildfire mapping by companies.

San Francisco, like the rest of the state, has seen a sharp rise in the number of residents on California’s FAIR Plan, which serves as an expensive last resort for those who are unable to find insurance with mainstream companies. Some 823 city homes are now on the FAIR Plan, up from 364 in 2019 — though overall numbers are still tiny compared with the city’s 406,000 housing units.

The neighborhoods that have by far seen the greatest increase in FAIR Plan users are in the Ingleside-Excelsior and Crocker-Amazon areas.

Safai, whose district includes those areas, said he thinks the increases are due to people who are “house rich but cash poor” — meaning that the home was inherited but the family members might not be able to afford to make enough renovations to meet



Benjamin Fanjoy/Special to the Chronicle

S.F. homeowners covered by one of the 10 largest insurers pay about one-third more in premiums than the state average.

insurers’ expectations, pushing them to eventually get dropped and go on the FAIR Plan.

“It’s unfortunate that it’s playing out and hitting working families, and the sticker price can be shocking,” he said, adding that the crisis “has to be something that we advocate for through our state delegation.”

Premiums are rising even for San Franciscans not on the FAIR Plan. Homeowners in the city who get coverage from one of the 10 largest insurers pay premiums that are about one-third higher than the state average, largely reflecting the high cost of replacing city homes.

Nina Hatvany, a real estate agent in San Francisco, said insurance used to be one of the last steps she would consider in a home sale. That all changed a year ago when Hatvany realized that older homes with certain features were struggling to get insured.

“We used to have, ‘Oops, three days before the closing, better get insurance because it’s wise to have insurance,’” Hatvany said. “Now, we’re making insurance often the contingency of the purchase.”

Though none of her deals have yet gone awry due to insurance, she’s wary: “It’s spread from single-family homes with repair or age issues to every single property,” she said.

In San Francisco, more than 40% of homes were built in or before 1940, according to Census

Bureau data. Last year, Farmers Insurance said it would stop renewing policies for apartments, townhomes and condominiums built before 1925. Safeco has stopped writing new policies for homes built before 1976 with outdated electrical systems.

Old wiring that dates back a century can make it “almost impossible to find coverage,” said Jerry Becerra, president of Barbary Insurance Brokerage.

Knob-and-tube wiring, which was common in homes until the late 1930s, was designed to carry a lighter load of electricity and when overpowered can lead to fires.

Pauric O’Flaithbheartaigh, an electrician working in San Francisco, said that over the past six months, about 60% of his business was related to replacing knob-and-tube wiring, up from about 10% previously. He attributes the increase to homeowners running into problems with insurance companies.

“There doesn’t seem to be any kind of gray area,” O’Flaithbheartaigh said, noting that the fixes are costly and can take a month. “It’s just either you do it or we’re dropping you.”

But replacing knob-and-tube wiring can be daunting, as John Garcia, who owns a three-unit building near the Castro, recently found.

Garcia discovered that he will be non-renewed by State Farm in December. To qualify for new insurance, he concluded that he

must fully replace knob-and-tube wiring in the units, one of which he lives in, despite the other upgrades to electrical systems he’s made in the past. But that means breaking plastered walls and offering his tenants the option of temporarily relocating.

Garcia plans to make the change this fall and knows the building will be safer for it, but it will cost him around \$110,000.

“That’s a pretty big hit for a little guy like me,” Garcia said. “I don’t have that in pocket change. I had to go apply for loans and get approvals for them.”

Aging roofs are also getting more scrutiny in San Francisco, with companies using aerial images and even drones to assess quality and look for things like moss or flat roofs that can lead to leakage.

Scott Davis at Standard Roofing in San Francisco said that since late last year he has been getting an average of three to four calls a week from people dealing with roof-related insurance issues — significantly more than even a year ago.

“I think that (insurers) exaggerate a little bit,” Davis said. Pondering — a common issue these days with insurers, he said — is “not a reason to replace the roof,” in his view, because the water will eventually evaporate, even if a drain or downspout needs fixing.

Ragan, the Sunnyside homeowner, climbed to his own roof to check for ponding after receiving a nonrenewal notice.

“I went up there. I took pictures of the roof. I rolled a golf ball down certain areas of the roof to show that there was absolutely no puddling,” Ragan said.

Safeco said that it does not use drones but does use satellite imagery to identify issues on homeowners’ roofs. “Advances in satellite imagery are useful to fully understand the condition of a property and to identify issues that we — and homeowners — otherwise may not know exist,” a spokesperson said.

Janet Ruiz, a spokesperson for the Insurance Information Institute, noted that aerial photography “saves you from having to take time off work and be at home when an inspector comes.”

Another group of San Francis-

cans affected by the crisis is condo owners, who often face added complexity because every condo is also governed by a master insurance policy, which covers damage to the building, grounds and outdoor features. Foremost Insurance Co., a Farmers Group subsidiary, stopped insuring all condos in the state earlier this year; some other companies are now reevaluating the master policies and, in some cases, raising the insurance price for reasons that condo owners often find to be illogical.

Steve Simon owns a condo in the Dogpatch neighborhood that he’s renting out to his family. He recently saw his condo’s master insurance policy jump from around \$19,090 to \$41,652, which means that his monthly dues to his condominium association are going to go up nearly 11%. The reason, the property manager told him, is just that insurers are raising premiums.

“He said, ‘You’re lucky. You’re not getting a triple or quadruple bill from the insurance company,’” Simon said, recounting a conversation with property management. “I found that to be absolutely astonishing.”

Another flummoxed San Franciscan is Beth Brown, who was told by Liberty Mutual in March that the fire insurance for the Potrero Hill property she owned would not be renewed by Liberty Mutual Fire Insurance, which, according to the letter she received, is “no longer renewing or writing Standard Fire personal insurance policies in this state.”

The California nonrenewals, the company told the Chronicle, are due to “an antiquated platform that we are retiring companywide.”

Brown — who had been with Liberty Mutual for decades — said her house was remodeled around 1997 and that she makes frequent renovations to keep it up to date.

The nonrenewal, she said, was “sort of like a boyfriend who breaks up with you and can’t really tell you why.”

Sribarsba Devulapalli and Megan Fan Muncie contributed to this report.

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