Keeping the city clean, one candy wrapper, cigarette butt and newspaper flyer at a time

Description

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Melanie Grossman regularly picks up litter on the streets of Russian Hill. But when she does, she said, â??people look at me like Iâ??m insane.â?• That baffles her. â??Donâ??t people care about their neighborhood, about making San Francisco a more livable city?â?•

When Grossman and her family moved to the neighborhood about 20 years ago, litter was a nascent problem.

â??The neighbors formed a broom brigade, sweeping the streets in solidarity.â?• When her neighbors stopped participating, about 15 years ago, Grossman carried on. â??I started picking up litter on my own, mostly newspapers, flyers and wrappers.â?•

Melanie Grossman regularly picks up litter on Polk Street near her home.

What she is doing is one of the many ways that the nonprofit Livable City encourages residents to better their neighborhoods. Through a variety of programs, the nonprofit works to improve transportation, land use, open space and environmental policies in San Francisco.

Grossman, 75, was one of 25 seniors at a recent Older Womenâ??s League meeting where Livable Cityâ??s president, Karen Allen, was making a case for people to help keep their streets clean. â??Walking and picking up litter is great exercise,â?• Allen said.

San Francisco spends about $35 million a year on street maintenance, substantially more than most other large cities, according to the City Controllerâ??s report for the 2018-19 fiscal year. Even so, dirty streets and sidewalks are one of the biggest complaints of people who live and work in San Francisco.

A citizen-city responsibility

Although keeping sidewalks free of litter and leaves is the responsibility of the fronting property or business owner, Public Works spokeswoman Rachel Gordon said the city augments with block sweepers in dozens of neighborhood commercial corridors.

Public Works also handles requests for cleanup of encampment debris, illegal dumping, needles and human waste. But Gordon said those 311 calls spiked over the past fiscal year, putting the city behind in its goal to respond 95 percent of the time within 48 hours. Now, itâ??s closer to 74 percent.

The city also maintains curbside trash cans. Residents can request to have one added in a neighborhood but the priority is for transit stops and high pedestrian traffic areas. â??Crews evaluate locations, looking at such factors as whether a can had been there before but was removed because it was a magnet for illegal dumping,â?• said Gordon. â??Most of all, we need to get people to stop trashing the city.â?•

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Fast food speeds up litter accumulation

Grossman is retired from her job as a geriatric social worker but still leads a busy life. â??Iâ??m almost finished writing my memoirs. I help a friend who has health problems, and Iâ??m active in the Network for Elders.â?• Yet she finds time to pick up trash. Although it might seem an endless battle, she doesnâ??t get discouraged. â??Itâ??s the right thing to do.â?•

Over the years she has seen litter dramatically increase. â??Because of the fast food joints on Polk Street, people just throw empty food containers on the street. Itâ??s disgusting.â?•

When she was young, Grossman remembers, there was an effective public education campaign, â??Donâ??t Be a LitterBug!â?• She laments there are no public messages like that anymore. â??No wonder we are not living in a civil society, when the basic cleanliness of our surroundings is ignored.â?•

One of the reasons the stretch of Polk Street near her has more than its share of street trash is also because area residents opted out of the city street cleaning machines that sweep up the gutters. They force residents to move their cars twice a week, on penalty of a ticket. So no one has been in any hurry to get them.

Grossman picks up litter because she likes clean surroundings. â??Just like my home, I want my neighborhood to be clean.â?• But she stands alone in her efforts. Neighbors â??say itâ??s not our job; itâ??s for the sanitation workers.â?• Her children â??think Iâ??m going to get some disease.â?• She takes a plastic bag with her or finds one and in a nod to caution, picks up only dry trash.

As far as approaching people who litter in front of her, Grossman is circumspect. â??People could be mentally ill and I would want to avoid a confrontation.â?•

And then thereâ??s plogging

San Francisco might learn from street trash programs in other countries, she said, mentioning Irelandâ??s â??Tidy Townsâ?• awards. â??It could be a real business draw.â?•

Then thereâ??s the new plogging fad that originated in Sweden. Thatâ??s picking up litter while jogging.

Thatâ??s what Livable Cityâ??s Allen, 57, does after sweeping the sidewalks in front of her house and that of three neighbors. â??On my last plogging run, I filled up five bags, emptying them at public trash cans as I went along.â?•

Grossman and Allen find endless candy wrappers, convenience and junk food containers and cigarette butts. â??Did you know that cigarette butts are plastic and the most littered item on the planet?â?• Allen said. â??And they contain toxic chemicals like arsenic that contaminate soil and water.â?•

Grossman hopes seeing seniors pick up litter might influence the younger generation. â??If everyone would just bend down and pick up one piece of litter each day, weâ??d have no litter.â?•

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Studies show that litter begets litter, said Allen.â?• When people see litter, consciously or unconsciously, they get the message that no one cares, this place doesnâ??t matter.â?•

Public Works is doing its part by encouraging people not to litter in the first place. Its â??Love our Cityâ?• campaign, which kicked off September, brings 200 to 400 volunteers each month to different supervisorial districts to work on cleaning and greening projects. They also visit schools to teach children about helping to keep their city clean. And it has partnered with corporations, such as Safeway and Twitter, to have their employees pick up litter.

â??San Francisco is a magnificent city and we need to nurture a culture of public pride,â?• Gordon said.

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jrobbins