



## ACT NOW TO HALT UTILITY BOX BLIGHT

April 7, 2011

By: Milo Hanke, Past President, San Francisco Beautiful

**Important Public Hearing!** Be there and be heard:

**Tuesday, April 26 at 4 PM**  
**Board of Supervisors Chambers, City Hall**  
**1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place**  
**San Francisco, California 94102**

Soon you may find a huge utility box installed in front of your home and there will be nothing you can do about it. If AT&T prevails, hundreds of new utility boxes will occupy sidewalks throughout all neighborhoods of the city.

San Francisco Beautiful (SFB) and the Planning Association for the Richmond (PAR) are urging community groups to officially join the fight and endorse the Appeal we have filed to require the City to conduct a responsible and transparent environmental analysis of alternatives prior to the installation of 726 utility boxes on our City sidewalks.

We are asking the Board of Supervisors to enforce existing regulations limiting the privatization of our public sidewalks. AT&T is attempting to sidestep the more costly alternatives required under regulations signed by Mayor Ed Lee in 2005, when he was director of the Department of Public Works. Those regulations state that, if not placed underground, utility boxes are to be placed on *private* property. This private-sector solution requires genuine, thorough efforts to contract property owners who are willing to lease space for Internet and cable equipment. These existing regulations state that street-level fixtures are a last resort only if the other two approaches prove technologically or economically infeasible.

In writing the 2005 regulations (and after extensive collaboration with San Francisco Beautiful), Ed Lee determined “**...surface-mounted facilities in the public right-of-way will impede travel on public streets, inconvenience property owners, create visual blight, or otherwise incommode the use of the public rights-of-way by the public.**”

AT&T’s 726 proposed utility boxes are four-feet high, over four-feet wide, and over two feet deep. They would be flanked by vertical posts to prevent damage by vehicles. Already intrusive, they will be permanent graffiti magnets, obstacles to the visually impaired, and hazards to opening passenger car doors. As to property values, a utility box detracts from the “curb appeal” of one’s house or commercial property.

Mrs. Friedel Klussmann  
*Founder*

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We are asking the Board of Supervisors to reverse the Planning Department's decision that granted AT&T a blanket go-ahead to install 726 utility boxes without an Environmental Impact Report. The recent departmental finding – called a Categorical Exemption from the California Environmental Quality Act – officially denies that the massive installation would have a cumulative impact upon the quality of the public right-of-way.

In 2008, AT&T made an application for a Categorical Exemption for a similar, citywide installation. Community groups voiced opposition at a contentious environmental impact hearing held before the full Board of Supervisors. During the City's 2008 environmental impact hearing, then-Supervisor Jake McGoldrick revealed AT&T's dubious efforts to place utility boxes on private property. AT&T's letter soliciting property owners had made no mention of compensation. Before a vote was taken, the Dallas-based telecommunications giant withdrew its application.

Our community universally acknowledges the need for expanded Internet and cable capacity. However, it is *where* these utilities are to be housed that seriously concerns San Francisco Beautiful and other civic groups. The AT&T scheme, as it now stands, would burden the public realm while solely benefiting private parties. Instead, SFB continues to advocate that private firms bear the full cost of their installations rather than impose such a burden on our public sidewalks and streetscapes.

In recent meetings with AT&T, SFB and other civic groups heard excuses rather than a desire to make undergrounding and private-property solutions work. They claimed landlords wanting too much rent, lack of 24-hour access, lack of liability insurance, and the inconvenience of AT&T obtaining building permits or zoning variances – all solvable issues. AT&T profit margins may be more than ample to offset these factors since one utility box, if fully subscribed, might generate more than \$700,000 in annual revenue. Claims of “can't afford it” place the burden of proof upon carriers.

San Francisco property owners can be a part of the solution, collecting reasonable rents for housing these new utilities (as opposed to finding large metal boxes permanently mounted in front of their buildings).



*A utility box welcomes neighborhood blight*

San Francisco Beautiful cautions against the precedent of ceding our sidewalks to AT&T. As other utilities follow suit, thousands of boxes would further blight our sidewalks – if the Categorical Exemption from environmental review is not reversed by the Board of Supervisors.

San Francisco need not compromise the unique character and livability of our neighborhoods in order to remain a leader in both technological innovation and utilization.

We urge concerned citizens and community organizations to contact their Supervisor in support of an Environmental Impact Report and to come testify:

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**1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place**  
**San Francisco, California 94102**

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