

Bathhouse ban revoked: Amid one pandemic, SF confronts legacy of another

📄 sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Bathhouse-ban-revoked-Amid-one-pandemic-San-15558609.php

September 12, 2020

Ryan Kost

The invitation was a deceptively plain and simple thing, just black type on white paper.

AFTER CLOSURE

Where are we now?

Where do we go from here?

What can we do as a community?

The San Francisco AIDS Foundation was holding a town hall on the evening of Monday, Oct. 22, 1984, to discuss the recent closure of the city's bathhouses. If the flyer was simple, the matter of the closures certainly was not.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic had brought death to San Francisco, and the bathhouses had been the topic of a pitched battle for the better part of a year. By the time city health officials announced the closure of 14 bathhouses, most of them gay, along with other clubs and bookstores that offered private rooms for sex, they had counted at least 175 dead.

For city leaders, it was a matter of public health. For many in the gay community, bathhouses were where men would have sex with men, yes, but also places where they might build community. What mattered most? Public health or individual liberty? The Washington Post described the scene as the "Bathhouse War."

But this summer, 36 years later and in the midst of another pandemic, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted to rescind the ban on bathhouses. The mayor approved the move on July 31.



Gay bathhouses and bookstores closed due to AIDS by health inspector Michael Petty. 10/17/1984 Gay Rights Project Gay Rights Project Brant Ward / The Chronicle 1984

“It all started off with a conversation, as most things do,” said Blade Bannon, a San Francisco activist and the man most responsible for the decades-later change in policy. Bathhouses exist in other states and countries; there’s one just across the bay in Berkeley. Why not San Francisco? he asked a friend awhile back. And so he learned about the ban and started asking questions. Three and a half years later, he found himself testifying before the Board of Supervisors, closing the loop on a decades-long fight.

“Looking back now, it almost seems surreal. ‘Wow. We did it,’” Bannon said.

Nothing will actually change until the current pandemic has passed and broader restrictions on social distancing have been lifted, but supporters of the move say it’s long overdue — if it was ever necessary in the first place. As conversations around COVID-19 and best practices for reopening and curbing the spread of the virus unfold daily, the parallels are hard to ignore.

Back in 1984, even in the gay community, there was a certain ambivalence around the proposed bathhouse closure, said Cleve Jones, a longtime gay rights activist who writes about the topic in his autobiography “When We Rise.”

These were very early days for the HIV/AIDS epidemic. There was no antibody test for the virus — that was still a year off — and the question of transmission was still unanswered. But gay rights were also tenuous at the time; sodomy laws were still pervasive and sexual liberation was seen as key to gay liberation.

Nobody wanted to watch their friends die or wonder whether they might be next.

“It was just terrifying,” Jones said. “You had people who were afraid to go into a gay bar. You had people who were afraid to hug.”

At the same time, the bathhouses were central to self-expression and building community. “On a good night I would have sex, but on any night, I would run into friends, we could sit in the Jacuzzi and gossip or plan our next political actions,” Jones said. “It was really hard for them to understand that it really was, for many of us, an important community experience that went beyond the sexual behavior that might occur on any given night.”



Names Project co-founder Cleve Jones not too long after he and Mike Smith launched the project to create the AIDS Memorial QuiltShowtime

Then-Mayor Dianne Feinstein was clear she wanted the bathhouses closed. Randy Shilts, The San Francisco Chronicle’s first openly gay reporter, supported the move and was labeled a traitor for doing so. Meanwhile, the AIDS Foundation and activists saw the closures

as shortsighted, arguing that the bathhouses could be potential hubs for sexual health education. Others, Jones said, worried that if the country's most liberal and gay-friendly city moved to shut these spaces, it would send the wrong message and empower bigots nationwide.

"There were passionate voices in favor of closure and opposed to closure, and then there were an awful lot of people who just didn't know what the best thing was to do, and it was bitter and ugly," Jones said. "Gay men were divided and arguing, but we also had that occurring under the microscope of public opinion. It was an extremely uncomfortable situation for all of us."

Mervyn Silverman, the San Francisco director of public health, tried to walk a fine line. Again and again gay men told him: *Please don't close the bathhouses; they're the only places I feel safe*. But he was tasked with maintaining public health. "It was really crazy back then," he said in a recent interview. "In the early years, none of us knew what in the hell we were doing."

Ultimately, he decided the closures were necessary. The bathhouses, he said at the time, were "fostering disease and death." He rejected the argument that the spaces could be used for prevention education. "Having a sign in the bathhouse that said 'Sex is risky,'" he said recently, "is like having a sign in the candy store saying 'Sugar is bad for you.'"

Still, he was wary of any city mandate that might be easily overturned and instead set out to earn the support of the gay community. He didn't make much headway until one gay activist, Larry Littlejohn, moved to put the ban on the ballot.

"For nine months Littlejohn, incensed about what he saw as bathhouse owners' half-hearted efforts at posting AIDS warning notices, had been pleading with the city health department to close the bathhouses," the Washington Post reported at the time. "Now he was publicly filing notice that he would seek signatures for a ballot initiative — that the people of San Francisco should be allowed to decide whether men could have sex in gay bathhouses."

The prospect of a November ballot question was concerning — some activists thought it would bring out an antagonistic electorate and tank the chances of two openly gay candidates running for public office. Supporting a move by the city was suddenly the lesser of two evils. Two weeks later, in April 1984, Silverman announced that bathhouses would be inspected and monitored — and no longer offer private rooms. "Things the way they are cannot continue," Silverman said at the time. By October, under those new rules, 14 bathhouses were ordered to close. Protesters compared the move to something out of Nazi Germany.



Protest at City Hall against the closing of gay bathhouses in order to prevent the spread of HIV / AIDS.
10/15/1984 Gay Rights Project Arthur Frisch / The Chronicle 1984

Thirty-six years later, the issue has cooled considerably. Drugs exist that all but prevent the transmission of HIV, even by those who carry the virus, and public health approaches to sexual education have modernized. The 1984 ban no longer made sense.

“These regulations have long outlived any usefulness they may have had,” said Laura Thomas, the director of harm reduction for the AIDS Foundation.

As Blade Bannon asked around, he found little resistance to lifting the ban. He started making his case before city health leaders — the changes in sexual health, the relative safety of a bathhouse where others might be around, the opportunity these spaces afford those who are just coming out or might need a place to sober up after bars close. He had gone to the bathhouses from when he was 18. “When I was that age, that was a safe place for me to go be myself,” he told city officials. “Make the healthy choice, the easy choice.”

Eventually Supervisor Rafael Mandelman, who represents District Eight, which includes the Castro neighborhood, took up the cause with Bannon. “There are bathhouses in cities around the world that are known to gay travelers and celebrated,” Mandelman said. “They can be an important part of queer communities’ cultural and economic life.

“It’s hard to second-guess the decisions of a beleaguered Department of Public Health, (but) four decades later, the choices that they made then are not right for today.”

In late July, the ban was lifted without objection.

All those years ago, the flyer asked: *Where do we go from here?* The question seems as timely as ever.

“We’re in a moment of tremendous uncertainty,” Mandelman said. “The Planning Department just put out an LGBTQ heritage strategy. ... There’s a lot of anxiety, not just for the future of Castro as the ‘gayborhood,’ but also the future of all types of queer establishments.”

Bannon said he’s spoken to investors interested in bringing new bathhouses to San Francisco. “COVID is not going to last forever,” he said. And when the current pandemic fades, he and Mandelman hope the bathhouses will be a part of the economic recovery and the renewal of queer spaces lost over the past decade.

“There is going to be a moment when things turn around, and we’ll have these empty spaces that we have to figure out what to do with,” Mandelman said. “I certainly hope that bathhouses are a part of it.”

Ryan Kost is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: rkost@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@RyanKost](https://twitter.com/RyanKost)