



Rashi Kesarwani
Councilmember, District 1

CONSENT CALENDAR
September 15, 2026

TO: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

FROM: Councilmember Rashi Kesarwani (Author)

SUBJECT: District 1 Support for the Gilman District
Merchants Association to Promote Longterm
Sustainability and Area Improvements: Relinquishment of Council
Office Budget Funds to General Fund and Grant of Such Funds

RECOMMENDATION

Adopt a resolution approving the expenditure of an amount not to exceed \$65,000 from the FY 2026-27 office budget of District 1 Councilmember Rashi Kesarwani to provide a one-time capacity building grant to support the Gilman District Merchants Association (GDMA) to promote economic development, district-wide improvements and long-term sustainability of the Gilman District Street Fair (GDSF).

Distribution of funds should be approved by the Gilman District Coordinating Committee, the representative advisory board established to comply with the fiscal agent, the Berkeley Chamber of Commerce. Use of funds should prioritize:

- Salary/stipend for part-time director of the GDMA
- Stipends for key volunteers for the Gilman District Street Fair
- Business Administration for the GDMA outside of salaries including:
 - Publicity, promotion, membership building and website maintenance for the GDMA
 - Event planning and execution of GDMA networking and social gatherings
- Public Safety Enhancement Grants to local businesses

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

The nascent Gilman District Merchants Association Fills a Vital Gap in a Challenging Area. West Berkeley's Gilman District has long been the city's industrial heart. Bound by Codornices Creek, Camelia Street, the railroad tracks and San Pablo Avenue, this expansive area now hosts a diverse mix of wineries, breweries, artisanal food producers, startups, nonprofits, maker spaces, auto shops and an urban farm. This sheer variety and physical footprint have made community cohesion among district stakeholders more challenging. For years, self-appointed independent merchants organized periodic networking events with City of Berkeley staff support.

The official Gilman District Merchants Association, however, launched just last year. This paid-membership organization now employs a part-time staff member dedicated to advocating for and supporting the district.

This staff person works in a limited capacity though has wide-ranging responsibilities including:

- GDMA publicity and promotion;
- Membership recruitment and acquisition;
- Advocacy for enhanced placemaking and safety improvements;
- Organizing social and networking events; and
- Maintaining a social media presence to encourage additional foot traffic into the district.

Since its Launch in 2023, The Gilman District Street Fair (GDSF) Has Grown into a Premier Annual Event Celebrating the District's Diversity and Economic Vitality. Originally established to revitalize and uplift a challenging area, the fair has successfully united local volunteers around a shared community vision. Each year, the event showcases local artisans, businesses, food, drink and live music. Its rapid growth culminated in the 2026 fair, which hosted over 200 vendors and 7,000 attendees, earning the Silver award for Best Outdoor Art Event in the East Bay Express Reader's Poll. Now a highly anticipated citywide tradition for families and residents of all ages, the fair's expanding scale can no longer be sustained by volunteer labor alone.

Although the Street Fair Fosters Strong Cohesion Among GDSF Volunteer Organizers, the Operational Demands and Expenses Remain Substantial.

Planning for the April event begins each September, and while the 2026 fair generated a \$7,225 profit on \$29,600 in expenses, these margins are insufficient to fund dedicated administrative staff. Ultimately, sole reliance on volunteer efforts for an initiative of this scale is unsustainable; an allocation of surplus office funds would help secure the long-term viability of the street fair.

BACKGROUND

The District 1 Office Has a Significant History of Materially Supporting the Gilman District and Its Stakeholders. A partial list of the policy and budget referrals and material support include the following:

- "Resolution for Safe Recreational Vehicle (RV) Parking at Designated City-Owned Parking Lots During Overnight Non-Business Hours"¹ - a proposal to address the high concentration of RVs located in the Gilman District: February 2020;

¹ February 11, 2020 City Council Meeting, item #17: Resolution for Safe Recreational Vehicle (RV) Parking at Designated City-Owned Parking Lots During Overnight Non-Business Hours:

https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/xf3ozlzp57own2b7rb1r/2_11_2020-CLK-Agenda-Packet-Public-District-1-REGULAR-Resolution-for-Safe-Recreational-Vehicle-RV-Parking-at-Designated-City-Owned-Parking-Lots-During-Overnight-Non-Business-Hours-Supp.pdf?rlkey=sv7rofsla6eqf3oeassclht6m&st=8io99qd4&dl=0

- “Refer to the City Manager to Establish a Framework for Parking Benefits Districts in the Gilman and Lorin Commercial Districts” - a referral to create a framework in which to establish a Parking Benefits Improvement District where revenues from meters would stay within the district to help make streetscape and safety improvements: January 2022;²
- “Budget Referral: Expand Scope of the Downtown Streets Team to Include Services within the Gilman District” - a referral to expand the scope of the Downtown Streets Team that would assist with regular cleaning and street condition improvements in the Gilman District: April 2022;³
- “Budget Referral: Capacity Building for Merchant Associations in the Gilman and Lorin Districts” - a budget referral for a one-time grant of \$10,000 to support economic development within the district with the funds being contingent upon establishing a community advisory board of stakeholders and obtaining fiscal sponsorship. This process led to the creation of the Gilman District Coordinating Committee which is still active: May 2022;⁴
- Gilman District Street Fair Organizing Committee - District 1 office support in creating and institutionalizing the award-winning annual street fair showcasing the Gilman District: April 2023 and beyond.

These collected efforts were made in recognition of the unique and valuable aspects of a commercial district in need of institutional support. As challenging conditions remain, so does the need for advocacy and an organizing body such as the Gilman District Merchants Association.

Previous Grants and Budget Allocations Are Insufficient to Ensure Long-term GDMA Sustainability. To date, the Gilman District Coordinating Committee has applied for several grants and thus far has received two: a Commotion West Berkeley grant of \$3,000 for civic arts related activities (2023); and a City of Berkeley FY 2026 Civic Arts (Community Festivals) grant. The funds have been used for general street fair expenses and to compensate artists (community muralists), performers (live musicians and dance teachers) and sound technicians for the GDSF in 2024 and 2026.

In FY 2025 and FY 2026, the city allocated \$20,000 to the Gilman District. This allocation was redirected from the budget referral to establish a Parking Benefits

² January 18 2022, City Council Meeting, Item #18: Refer to the City Manager to Establish a Framework for Parking Benefits Districts in the Gilman and Lorin Commercial Districts: <https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022-01-18%20Item%2018%20Parking%20Benefits%20Districts%20in%20the%20Gilman%20and%20Lorin.pdf>

³ April 26 2022, City Council Meeting, Item #25: Budget Referral: Expand Scope of the Downtown Streets Team to Include Services within the Gilman District: <https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022-04-26%20Item%2025%20Budget%20Referral%20%20Expand%20Scope%20of%20the%20Downtown%20Streets.pdf>

⁴ May 24 2022, City Council Meeting, Item #8: Budget Referral: Capacity Building for Merchant Associations in the Gilman and Lorin Districts: <https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2022-05-24%20Item%208%20Rev%20Kesarwani.pdf>

Improvement District (PBID) in the Gilman and Lorin Districts. The money had originally been earmarked to hire a consultant to draft the enabling PBID legislation, but the endeavor was put on hold due to the longstanding deficit in the City's Parking Fund. The Gilman District Coordinating Committee, now functioning as the board for the GDMA was allocated \$10,000 per year for FY 2025 and FY 2026, and will be allocated an additional \$5,000 for FY 2027. The funds have been used for:

- Monthly stipends for GDMA director: \$1,050/month (\$12,600 annually)
- Acquisition and installation of public art at 5th and Gilman: \$5000
- GDSF 2026 Event Fees including (partial list):
 - City of Berkeley Special Event Permit: \$384
 - COB Environmental Health Food Vendor Coordinator Permit: \$182
 - COB Environmental Health Sound Permits: \$132
 - City of Berkeley required Traffic Control Plan: \$363.14
 - Insurance for Special Events: \$733.38
 - Herc Rentals Delineators and No Parking signs for event set up: \$524.55

FISCAL IMPACT

The District 1 office recommends allocating \$65,000 from its surplus office budget to support the Gilman District Merchants Association.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

The Gilman District Merchants Association provides an essential service for Gilman District stakeholders yet has limited funds to ensure long-term sustainability. To date, the GDMA and the GDSF have been primarily staffed by volunteer labor. As the level of time and responsibilities associated with the association and street fair grow, volunteers are unable to fulfil the needs without compensation. The allocation of surplus District 1 office funds could be used to supplement the stipend for the part-time staff for the GDMA and to more fairly compensate some of the lead volunteers with the GDSF Organizing Committee.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Funds allocated for staff and district-wide improvements could help maintain the overall conditions in the Gilman District, including assisting with addressing garbage, debris and illegal dumping.

CONTACT

Rashi Kesarwani, Councilmember District 1

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ATTACHMENT

- 1) Resolution

RESOLUTION NO. ##,###-N.S.

RELINQUISHING DISTRICT 1 OFFICE FUNDS TO PROVIDE A CAPACITY BUILDING GRANT TO THE GILMAN DISTRICT MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION

WHEREAS, West Berkeley's Gilman District contains a diverse mix of businesses including wineries, breweries, artisanal food producers, startups, nonprofits, maker spaces, auto shops, and an urban farm, making community cohesion and advocacy among district stakeholders a vital need; and

WHEREAS, the Gilman District Merchants Association (GDMA) launched in 2025 as a paid-membership organization employing a part-time staff member dedicated to economic development, membership recruitment, advocacy, and district-wide improvements; and

WHEREAS, the annual Gilman District Street Fair (GDSF), sponsored by the GDMA, has grown significantly, hosting over 200 vendors and 7,000 attendees in 2026, and its expanding scale can no longer be sustained solely by volunteer labor; and

WHEREAS previous grants and city allocations are insufficient to ensure the long-term operational sustainability of the GDMA and GDSF; and

WHEREAS, Councilmember Rashi Kesarwani has a significant history of assisting this valuable commercial district in need of institutional support and seeks to continue supporting the district's economic vitality and long-term sustainability by providing financial assistance from the surplus District 1 office budget;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Council of the City of Berkeley that funds relinquished by Councilmember Rashi Kesarwani from the FY 2026-27 District 1 office budget up to \$65,000 shall be granted to the GDMA as a one-time capacity building grant.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the distribution of these funds shall be approved by the Gilman District Coordinating Committee, acting as the representative advisory board, in compliance with its fiscal agent, the Berkeley Chamber of Commerce.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the use of these funds shall prioritize the following activities:

- Personnel Support: Salary/stipend for the part-time director of the GDMA and stipends for key volunteers of the Gilman District Street Fair.
- Business Administration: Publicity, promotion, membership building, website maintenance and the planning of networking and social gatherings.
- District Improvements: Public Safety Enhancement Grants to local businesses.

