

Wells Fargo giving \$14.5 million to aid recovery

By Roland Li

Wells Fargo is donating \$14.5 million to groups that help local low-income communities and minority-owned businesses in an effort to bolster the region's economic recovery during the pandemic.

The funds come from fees that the bank generated from processing Paycheck Protection Program loans, the federal program that helped businesses sustain their payrolls during the pandemic. The San Francisco bank previously committed around \$420 million nationally to aid COVID recovery, including \$13 million to six Bay Area nonprofits.

The Bay Area's small business sector lags behind the national economy, with overall business recovery not expected for four to five months, according to a San Francisco controller's office report. New small business formation is also flat.

"We are starting to see signs of recovery," said Christina Pels-Martinez, a Wells Fargo region bank president. "A lot of our businesses in San Francisco have been impacted by the fact that many of the offices remain empty." Wells Fargo itself, one of the city's largest employers, plans to mandate a return to office in January.

The groups include Community Development Financial Institutions, which work with minority-owned and woman-owned companies in low-income neighborhoods, and organizations that provide technical assistance.

The San Francisco bank is also helping fund holiday streetlights and decorations in the Bayview with a \$75,000 donation, including a 20-foot Christmas tree that will be lit in a ceremony on Thursday with Mayor London Breed. It's the biggest-ever holiday celebration in the neigh-



Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

Juanita Jackson (center) and Mary Fleming work alongside volunteers to decorate a tree donated by Wells Fargo in the Bayview district last week.

hood, said Katy Fitzsimmons, a Wells Fargo community relations senior consultant. "Wells Fargo's long had a focus on Bayview. It's a historically under-invested community. It's a historically Black community," Fitzsimmons said.

"Hopefully this will become a new model" for other groups to provide philanthropy, she said. Renaissance Entrepreneurship Center, which

has offices throughout the Bay Area, is receiving more than \$500,000 from Wells Fargo, which will help it add three more people to its staff of 30, said CEO Sharon Miller.

"It will help us tremendously," Miller said. Renaissance has helped small business owners like Olton Rensch, owner of Tallo's Coffee & Tea in the Bayview, which lost over 85% of sales during the pandemic. Rensch had to use

his own savings to help pay his five employees and two contractors, but wanted to keep the business going after personally investing in it.

He received training and mentoring from Renaissance in areas like marketing and online sales. He also received around \$20,000 in grants through Renaissance and other sources, which helped him pay rent. Business has improved thanks in part to e-com-

merce, and sales are now above 50% of pre-pandemic levels, he said. Numerous small businesses have needed help in expanding their digital sales, especially with some being shut down by health orders, and using tech like Zoom and email, Miller said.

"Online sales are really important, and also continuing to reach out to their customers," Miller said. Rensch has been able to sell nationally thanks to e-commerce training and recently shipped Tallo's ginger beverage to Chicago and 5,000 of its 12-ounce coffee bags to a company in Indiana.

"My mission is to put upscale coffee shops in historically diverse ethnic communities, where these big guys don't want to go," said Rensch, an immigrant from Suriname, who hopes to benefit both local residents and bring in new visitors. "If people visit San Francisco, we want them to visit the Bayview," he said.

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