

December 7, 2010
Oakland Asian Cultural Center
388 9th Street, Oakland, CA
3:30 to 5:00 p.m.

LAKE MERRITT STATION AREA PLAN

MERCHANT'S TEA

Thirty-four local merchants and interested community members attended the Merchant's Tea meeting on December 7, 2010 from 3:30 to 5:00 pm to discuss their concerns, goals, and vision for the Lake Merritt Station Area. Jennie Ong of the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce and Phuc Tran of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce welcomed the group and City of Oakland staff provided some background information on the Plan. The remainder of the meeting was opened to the attendees to discuss issues, goals and their vision for the Planning Area. Guiding questions were provided and the discussion was facilitated by project consultant, Dyett & Bhatia. Simultaneous interpretation services were offered, and four participants made use of Cantonese language interpretation services. In addition, 12 surveys were completed by meeting attendees, the results of which are provided below. A summary of the feedback received at the meeting follows.

MEETING SUMMARY

The importance of Chinatown merchants to the City's cultural and economic vibrancy was emphasized. Overall, merchants want to expand Chinatown and attract more people to the area to better compete with other Asian markets and centers. It was noted that a key asset that Chinatown has in competing with Ranch 99-type development (supermarket with Asian products, usually part of a multi-tenant shopping center in suburban setting) is the unique and vibrant environment. Participants were clear that they wanted to be involved throughout the planning process.

ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Participants indicated that two of the biggest issues for merchants are safety and parking. Other issues included cleanliness and maintenance. They also expressed some concern about financing improvements and that it will take too long to implement the Plan.

Safety

Improving safety came up as a priority issue throughout the meeting. Lack of a sense of safety was noted as the primary reason that there is a low turnout of customers at night. It was emphasized that one way to improve safety is to increase activity in the area and the number of pedestrians on the street. Safety was mentioned throughout the meeting as a major concern.

Parking

Because Chinatown is a regional destination, customers and clients drive from all over. To keep people coming, people need to be able to park. Merchants advocated for more public parking that is convenient. The cost, availability, and convenience of parking were all concerns. For instance, it was noted that the occupancy rate decreased dramatically when the

price to park in the Pacific Renaissance Plaza garage went up from \$1.25 to \$2.00 per hour (an average of 10,000 fewer cars per month). Participants suggested lower parking fees in general, and in particular for customers; one participant suggested that the pricing be cheapest for the first hour and then go up, so that short-term users pay less than long-term users, such as office workers and employees.

It was also noted that the parking meters are too expensive, particularly when compared to the cost of goods in Chinatown, and that the high cost drives away customers. If parking costs too much, people will go to other more suburban markets and centers that have more convenient and lower-priced (or free) parking. It was felt that ticketing for parking enforcement is too aggressive, and causes a loss in customers and sales tax revenue.

In addition, it was noted that there is a shortage of short-term parking, including green zones for quick grocery trips, yellow zones for unloading of merchandise, and white zones for passenger loading. As a result, many cargo trucks double park a few blocks away from storefronts to unload goods and obstruct traffic.

Finally, it was also noted that there are many designated disabled parking spaces and participants felt there were frequent abuses of disabled parking privileges and suggested that handicap placards should be better regulated.

Cleanliness and Maintenance

Participants were concerned that Chinatown is too dirty and that there are too many potholes. Some participants felt that merchants should clean the street when they close at night. It was also felt that streets should be better maintained by the City. It was noted that the Single Resident Occupancy (SRO) buildings have no on-site waste disposal and generate much garbage that goes to public trash receptacles on the sidewalk. It was felt that garbage services should be required for all properties. The issue of street cleaning was also raised.

Zoning

It was noted that the current zoning in Chinatown can be a hurdle for businesses that potentially want to come into Chinatown. For instance, medical service is not permitted by right on the ground floor of buildings, within 30 ft of the front property line, in a zone (CBD-P). This regulation caused a former acupuncture office to remain vacant for two years without a new tenant. Participants noted that the zoning should allow traditional businesses in Chinatown without requiring a conditional use permit or variance.

IDEAS AND GOALS

Vendors and Markets

Street Vendors

Participants suggested that, particularly in the short-term, while the economy is slow, street vendors could create activity, attract business, add to the vibrancy of the area and reduce unemployment. The street vendors on Telegraph in Berkeley were cited as an example, where vendors sell cheap goods and/or handcrafted items and clothing. It was suggested that vendors be allowed on weekends or nighttime only, both to avoid competition with permanent retail shops and help enliven Chinatown during off-peak hours. It was noted that vendors could

attract Laney College students, fill up empty streets with street vendors, and put “eyes on the streets.” Allowing street vendors would also serve as business incubation that could lead to more permanent merchants.

However, it was noted by several participants that street vendors represent competition for local retail merchants, since they have lower overhead and operational costs. Some participants expressed a fear that vendors would do very well, but that merchants would be hurt. Concern over illegal vendors was also raised. It was noted that licenses could be auctioned off, and that the licenses could regulate what vendors could sell and the hours they operate, and that existing merchants could also participate with their own street vending location. It is also difficult for street vendors to sell complex food (regulated by Health Department).

Night Market

While participants were supportive of a night market, which would bring in more activity, it was noted that the previous year’s night market experience (held in Pacific Renaissance Plaza on Saturdays during June and July) was successful for the first few weeks, but then attendance dropped. Meeting participants speculated that this was because few people knew about it, and travel from BART to Chinatown is currently disconnected. Several suggestions were made to improve the success of a night market. These included more marketing, bringing people in on BART, and holding the market on the street and on a regular basis. Creating a clear pedestrian-friendly route to these activities from BART would also be important to the success of the market. It was suggested that discount fares to Lake Merritt Station could attract BART riders to the area. Then people could be encouraged to take BART in to Lake Merritt Station, walk and shop through Chinatown, and then go home via 12th Street BART. Vendors could also help activate the connection between Chinatown and Laney. A few suggestions for a location of a night market included the Lake Merritt BART Station parking lot and closing streets in Chinatown like they do in Old Oakland for the farmer’s market.

One example of a successful night market was from a Chinatown in Australia, where a vibrant open night market operates 365 days a year through all weather. The market is well advertised and offers unique food delicacies and handcrafted items. The market includes vendors as well as local businesses that bring their goods out onto the street.

Expand Chinatown and Promote New Development

There was a concern that Chinatown has become stagnant in the last few years; it was felt that in order to remain vibrant, it has to grow. Because there are boundaries to the north (EBMUD office building) and the south (I-880), it was felt that Chinatown should expand east toward Lake Merritt, which would also link Chinatown to BART. It was noted that businesses are already expanding that way, but they would like to see more retail and professional businesses (no big institutions). Businesses existing near the BART station noted that their business now primarily comes from Laney and office workers; they would like more businesses in that area to help reinforce it as an area for commerce.

Participants indicated that they want a true mix of uses that is balanced; and that the BART site in particular should have both housing and businesses. Participants wanted to attract new and more diverse development, including:

- Entertainment facilities, such as a theater that shows Chinese movies;

- Commerce generating businesses;
- Housing – market rate and some affordable;
- Retail – wider range of foods, restaurants, and businesses
- Service organizations for seniors/youth; and
- Offices

Participants noted that it was important that new development make economic sense (have a return on investment), and bring in revenue.

Density

The group was very interested in dense transit-oriented development. They referred to examples in Asian cities for high rise, dense, green, sustainable, and transit-oriented development with active businesses, retailers, and vendors. The Pacific Renaissance Plaza was also referred to as a good example of dense, mixed use development. It was felt that the first two floors could be commercial, with residential on top. An example from Montreal was also given where there is shopping underground, and residential above. It was noted that in Asia it is common to live in high rises, whereas people here have to learn how to live in high rises, but then they appreciate the convenience. It was suggested to do a study on how mixed-use development plays out in Asian cultures.

Density was noted as crucial for safety and an active street at night, and to build a strong customer base. It was felt that new development should include market-rate housing with some affordable housing, lots of retail space, and possibly a convention center. Tax dollars could then support social services.

Housing

Some participants felt that there is an over-concentration of senior housing in the area, and that this over-concentration does not contribute to the overall economic vitality of the Planning Area, since seniors are not big consumers of goods and services. It was noted, however, that while seniors do not have enough income to support retail in the area, traditionally when their families visit they would go out to shop or dine together in Chinatown. Now, due to the seniors and their families feeling unsafe, they often shop/dine somewhere outside of Chinatown.

It was noted that merchants need a stronger consumer base in the area - people that are willing and able to spend money and support nightlife activity, which would also improve safety. They advocated that there shouldn't be more housing just for seniors or formerly homeless in the area, and wanted more balanced housing development, including market rate and affordable housing. In particular, participants wanted to increase the population of young adults in Chinatown.

Attract Younger Generation

It was noted that currently there is an exodus of the younger generation from Chinatown. There is also a trend of younger generation of Asians leaving California to relocate in places like Phoenix and Austin that are perceived to be safer and where the cost of living is lower. Therefore, the Lake Merritt BART Station Area Plan needs to target the younger generation to

prevent out migration. It was felt this could be accomplished through several strategies, including:

- Addressing the parking issue;
- Addressing the safety issue;
- Establishing more night time entertainment businesses such as karaoke, movie theaters, and dessert and food options (while some exist, more variety is needed);
- Attracting Laney students to stay in Chinatown after school;
- Improving the quality of schools and capitalizing on the high quality of Lincoln Elementary School and its recent award/recognition as Blue Ribbon School to attract families;
- Providing housing units that accommodate multiple populations; and
- Accommodating international students.

Connections, Access, and Streetscape

Connections

While there are many great destinations and attractions in the Station Area, such as the Oakland Museum, Pacific Renaissance Plaza, Laney College, Lake Merritt parks and walking paths, Tai Chi at Madison Square Park and youth gatherings at Lincoln Elementary, participants noted that these places are not spatially connected to each other. It was felt that making connections between these resources is important since now the area is disjointed. Participants wanted to see these destinations connected to create synergy, make the area more cohesive, and bring people together.

Participants identified 8th Street, and possibly 9th Street, as potential main boulevards to connect Laney to the heart of Chinatown. The topic of converting these one-way streets to two-way streets came up, and the general feedback was that if two-way streets worked better, they were open to it. The question was also raised as to whether it was possible to build under the I-880 freeway to activate the under-crossing towards the Jack London and Waterfront Districts.

Streetscape

It was noted that in some places the streets feel unsafe, and that there are potholes everywhere, as well as dirty sidewalks and dangerous intersection and crosswalks. Merchants resoundingly supported street improvements and more street appeal, and in particular better street lighting. Other street improvements they expressed support for included trees to establish a unified streetscape, and better crosswalks and signals. It was noted that in general they do not like the recent streetscape improvements in Chinatown because they took away parking spaces and resulted in little holes that collect water and ultimately smell bad.

Transit

It was felt that the area is behind on transportation, and that there should be more transit ridership to and from the Lake Merritt BART Station, given the area's amenities/resources. It was noted that people want to live near transit so they don't have to drive, and can get off BART and run errands, eat, etc. A monthly BART pass was suggested as one way to get

people to use BART more often. It was also suggested that there needs to be more food options near Lake Merritt BART.

Access by Car

Since customers come from all over the region, access by car is important to merchants. The distinction between good traffic (coming into Chinatown) and bad traffic (passing through Chinatown) was made. It was noted that streets need to have loading zones and yellow zones. One suggestion for adding parking to the area was to redevelop the Salvation Army block with parking and retail (like Pacific Renaissance Plaza).

VISIONS

Several themes emerged to describe the vision for the Planning Area:

- Safe, vibrant and active;
- Chinatown expanded east to the Lake Merritt BART Station;
- A diversified commercial base that attracts a wider range of customers to visit;
- High density for both housing (including market rate and affordable housing) and businesses, possibly in high rise buildings;
- A wide mix of uses;
- Attractive to families and young people to spend more time in and to live in the Planning Area;
- Easily and affordably accessed by transit, on foot, and by car; and
- A financially sound and implementable Plan that supports commerce.

Location	Oakland Resident	Chinatown Resident	Business Type	Business History	Busiest Time	Slowest Time	# Employees	Floor Area (sq.ft)	Client Type	Rent	Lease	Stay in Chinatown?	Stay in 6 mos?	Other Comments
Webster & 8th St.	No	N/A	Fast food	25 years	1988	Now	10	1760	Families; Seniors; Others	Expensive	5 years	No	No	Retire soon
Alice & 9 th St.	No	N/A	Insurance	27 years	9-6pm		2	600	Families; Young Professionals; Seniors	Self-own	N/A	Yes	Yes	
9th St. & Harrison	No	N/A	Poultry Shop	28 years		Now	4	3800	Families; Seniors	Fair		Yes	Yes	
12th & Franklin (2 wks ago) 19th & Franklin (now)	No	N/A	Office Supplies	24 years	8:30-5:30pm		2	2100	Office occupants	Somewhat expensive, but worth it	5 years		Yes	We need balanced housing development, affordable, market-rate housing. No more low income housing or housing for formerly homeless
9th St. & Webster	Yes		Daily supplies/convenient store	25 years		Now	2	2500	Families	Affordable		Yes	Yes	
10th & Webster	No	N/A	Florist	36 years	11 to 2pm	2 to 4pm	0	700	Families	Affordable	5 years	Yes	Yes	
Pacific Renaissance Plaza (9th St & Franklin)	Yes	No	Chinatown Chamber	25 years	10:30-2:30	3:30-6pm	2	400	Professionals of all ages	Fair	2 years	Yes	Yes	For Chinatown to be vibrant, Chinatown businesses need to be able to expand toward the Lake Merritt BART Station area
Phoenix Plaza 8 th St., 9 th St. & Franklin	No	N/A	Property Management, Take-out restaurant			Property Management: all day Retail: 11-1; 4-5:30	16		Families; Young Professionals; Children; Seniors	Self-own	N/A	Yes	Yes	Clean the streets

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Franklin & 7 th St.; 8 th St. & Webster	No	N/A	Restaurant; market	15 years	10-3pm	3-9pm	40 + 20	20,000; 5,000	Families; Seniors	Too expensive	10 years	No	Yes	We are moving to expand in San Leandro. Must be safe! More parking (affordable), fix sidewalk, curb, potholes. Clean streets and sidewalk by the city. BART lots- underground parking, ground/2nd level retail, 3rd level offices; 4 to 20th condos!
Franklin & 7 th St.	Yes	Nearby	Law Office	1958	9-5pm	0	1	900	Families; Young Professionals; Seniors	Fair	mo/mo	Yes	Yes	Lack of public parking is biggest factor
13th & Franklin	No	N/A	Accounting	25 years	11	4			Young Professionals				Yes	
Pacific Renaissance Plaza (9th St & Franklin)	Yes	yes	Retail	3 months	1-6pm	after sunset	4	423	Young Professionals; Teenagers; Children	Expensive	5 years	Yes	Yes	