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MEMORANDUM

July 10, 2017

TO: Mayor and Council

CC: Sadhu Johnston, City Manager
Janice MacKenzie, City Clerk

FROM: Vancouver City Planning Commission

SUBJECT: Chinatown Economic Revitalization and Development Policies Review

Dear Mayor and Council,

In February, the City of Vancouver Planning Department held an open house for the [Chinatown Economic Revitalization and Development Policies Review](#). The open house was well attended; and the policies drew much attention among residents and urbanists, as well as in the media. Much of the critiques focused on impacts to the neighbourhood's fine-grained urban fabric, in particularly the allowance for buildings to be as high as 150ft and frontages to be as wide as 200ft.

The Vancouver City Planning Commission (VCPC) participated in the discussions and expressed our view that the essential characteristics of the Chinatown neighbourhood are comprised of both its fine-grained form and its cultural heritage. The proposed policies would have a negative effect on the future of Chinatown. This neighbourhood is only a few blocks in size. The proposed height and density allowances are out of scale of this established, historic neighbourhood. The policies seek to achieve many important goals, such as additional social housing. However, in the efforts to achieve a range of social, environmental, and economic goals, it is unclear that the proposed policies would contribute to the retention and strengthening of the existing neighbourhood.

We are encouraged that our viewpoints, and those of others, have been noted in the latest Chinatown Development Policy Changes progress report from staff to community. We wish to elaborate on our views and offer further recommendations to Council and staff for their review.

A [recent study conducted by the National Trust for Historic Preservation](#) shows that older, smaller buildings are key contributors to the local economy and a neighbourhood's livability. Focused on San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, D.C., the study demonstrates empirically that older, smaller buildings provide space for a strong local economy compared to new buildings. However, prescriptive zoning regulations and limited financial tools often make it difficult to reuse smaller, older (non-heritage) buildings and retain the reuses they support.

Furthermore, the Commissioners wish to broaden the discussion to draw attention to the preservation of intangible factors in this culturally rich neighbourhood. Even if the fine-scale physical fabric is retained, there is concern over social sustainability - how existing residents, shop owners, and community organizations that form the cultural and social fabric of the neighbourhood would survive the escalating land rents and redevelopment pressures.

Given Chinatown's unique cultural history and needs, the methodology required needs to be more grassroots oriented. To offer ideas for exploration, Commissioners have reviewed case studies, with a focus on grassroots oriented methodologies, from other cities facing similar issues. We believe the issues facing Chinatown are not exclusive to this neighbourhood. Lessons learned from these case studies may carry implications for Chinatown as well as other cultural and historic districts in our City.

Case Studies

Social Heritage Inventories

San Francisco Social Heritage Districts

Under San Francisco's [Japantown Social Heritage Program](#), "social heritage" is defined as elements, both tangible and intangible, that help define the beliefs, customs and practices of a particular community. The elements are important to a community's history and continuing cultural identity. This inventory was done in partnership with the Japantown Cultural Heritage Subcommittee of the [Japantown Task Force](#) which is comprised of advocates, shop owners, and residents.

Singapore National Heritage Board's Intangible Cultural Heritage Survey

The purpose of the [Singapore National Heritage Board's](#) survey is to identify, document, and celebrate the city state's multicultural communities. It uses as reference the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and as such the categories are broad and inclusive: oral traditions, performing arts, rituals and festivals, practices concerning the universe (e.g. fengshui), and traditional craftsmanship (including food heritage). The survey is conducted through primary field surveys and interviews, and supplemented by secondary archival research. The anticipated project completion date is early 2018.

Legacy Businesses

San Francisco Legacy Business Historic Preservation Funds

The loss of a bookstore demonstrated how some critical neighbourhood gathering places are private places of business. The [Legacy Business Registry](#) program has identified 100 establishments that are at least 30 years old, have distinct architecture or interior design,

and contribute to a sense of neighbourhood history. These businesses are eligible for a yearly grant based on the number of employees. Property owners with long term leases (10+ years) to Legacy Businesses are also eligible for an annual grant. The program is based on successful examples in Barcelona and Paris. Seattle, WA is currently undertaking a study to see if it could adopt a similar program.

Seattle IDEA Space

[IDEA Space](#) was created by [Seattle Chinatown International District Preservation and Development Authority](#) (SCIDpda). IDEA Space provides a resource centre for residents, business owners, and stakeholders of the Chinatown International District. It supports existing businesses in improving their businesses and connects property owners to fill vacancies with businesses that will benefit the neighbourhood. It also helps businesses and residents navigate changing rules and inform them of incentives and grant opportunities.

Local Impact Assessments

Business certifications based on social impact do exist, such as [B Lab's B Corporations](#). [LOCO BC](#), along with 11 other communities around North America has launched a [Quick Impact Assessment](#) that emphasized a business's local impact. Many small businesses, particularly ethnic neighbourhood-based businesses, would find certification cumbersome and expensive. The Quick Impact Assessment aims to offer a similar measurement tool that is shorter and more focused on community impact.

The influence of medical centre expansion on Boston's Chinatown

Boston's Chinatown is adjacent to a sprawling medical centre which provides may provide lessons for Vancouver's Chinatown and the proposed St Paul's development. In Boston, institutional expansion over the past 25 years has overpowered its Chinatown, eventually claiming one third of the land that was once part of Chinatown. Lower income residents are consequently being displaced by medical students and staff and the Asian population has dropped from 70% to below 50%.

Recommendations

1. The Vancouver City Planning Commission (VCPC) strongly recommends that the City of Vancouver review and evaluate the initiatives on retention of intangible heritage values in San Francisco, Seattle and elsewhere, as indicated in the case studies outlined above.
2. VCPC encourages the City to develop methodology for a social heritage inventory centered on the leadership and experiences of different communities affected by development in Vancouver's Chinatown.
3. VCPC encourages the City to develop a more expansive public dialogue about incentives for retention of cultural and social heritage assets and changes to design guidelines, rather than focusing only on strong land use controls.
4. VCPC urges the City to release the historical contextual statement by Donald Luxton & Associates in order to vigorously engage the community in the development of the methodology for a social heritage inventory in Chinatown.

5. VCPC urges the City to link the Chinatown initiatives with the St Paul's development, FC Flats and NE False Creek planning and to consider re-evaluating the resources allocated to the different initiatives to make them more equitable. The removal of the viaducts offers some development opportunities that might help some of the needed investment in Chinatown and the DTES.

Conclusion

In conclusion, VCPC Commissioners would like to thank City staff for their efforts to revitalize Chinatown and offer our assistance in promoting further dialogue and engaging the Chinatown community. We appreciate the new direction identified in the most recent update. Should you have any questions on the issues raised in this memorandum or require anything further, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Respectfully submitted,

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Chair, Vancouver City Planning Commission

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