

Chinatown Planning and Rezoning Study

June 26 Town Hall Meeting

M.S.131, 100 Hester Street

DRAFT REPORT – August 5, 2013

GENERAL COMMENTS

Number of participants: 98

Venue: The location of M.S. 131, at 100 Hester Street, was within easy access for most participants. The facilities were good and large enough to accommodate everyone. Staff was very helpful. There was some confusion regarding restrooms. Certain restrooms that were expected to be available throughout the meeting were locked half-way through and people had to be redirected.

Outreach:

- Member organizations (poster, flyer, door knocking)
- Press release
- Some distribution by community interns

Comments: Outreach could have started earlier, with more time spent distributing/posting flyers throughout the neighborhood and use of volunteers.

Meeting format:

- Introduction by CWG Co Chairs, Antony Wong and Wilson Soo
- Presentation by the Pratt Center / Collective Partnership
- Breakout session: 10 breakout groups
- Report back

Comments: The general format worked well. However, greater attention should have been paid to timing. We should have stipulated 6:00pm for registration with a 6:30pm start rather than merely posting a 6:00pm start time and expecting people to arrive earlier to register. We also needed to ensure that someone would be at the registration table to take care of latecomers. People came in late so they were not assigned to tables. We could have had a bit more time for the breakout session – 90 minutes rather than 70 as it took time for the groups to assemble. The breakout rooms were also too far away from each other.

The need for a facilitator and scribe for each group, plus an interpreter for half the groups presented a challenge. Graduate planning students from Pratt Institute provided invaluable back-up assistance. Only one Spanish-speaking person required interpreting assistance.

Food and drink should have been available during registration as well as during the breakout session.

There was a lack of interaction with the map at the breakout tables. It would have been good for each person to have their own map. Care should be taken in future to orient people when they get to the tables and provide instructions for the breakout session, including ground rules.

Handouts:

- Town Hall Agenda/Questions
- Survey forms
- Glossary of terms
- Copy of presentation

Comments: All handouts were in the three languages except for the Pratt Center / Collective Partnership presentation, which was only available in English. Chinese and Spanish translations of the presentation have been posted on the CWG website.

Returned survey forms: 36 (16 Chinese, 20 English)

BREAKOUT SESSION

The following is a summary of responses to general and targeted questions posed in the breakout session. Each breakout table followed a different sequence of targeted questions in order to ensure that most questions were covered.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. *What are unique or special characteristics of Chinatown and its surrounding areas that you value and want to preserve? Where?*

Housing: Affordability; public housing/affordable housing (last in NYC); homes for new immigrants and low income families; 100% low income housing if developed on public land; keep affordable housing for low-income families.

Culture: Culture of the Chinese people; living, working community/neighborhood - not a Chinatown "Epcot"; presence of multiple generations in Chinatown (bakeries /parks have a multigenerational clientele; sense of "Home" - community has been building over decades; the feeling of the community remains; memories spent with family and friends; food not catering to tourists - authentic for those who live here; ongoing influx of immigrants influence for food also welcoming; a place to find out who you are, part of a culture, tracing back your roots; a place to reunite with friends, over food etc.; taking part in Chinese New Year; need to unite Chinatown (many engines working separately until now); institutions are supportive for residents (culturally sensitive) and businesses are for locals, not for tourists; character of the neighborhood as cultural center of NYC.

Community: Chinatown is an immigrant low-income community; last working class community/ neighborhood; tight-knit community; support by community organizations (Project Reach, CAAAV, etc.); one place to get services you need without having to speak English; hospitable place for newcomers; hub for recent immigrants; some may feel that when they arrive here as immigrants there may be no need to leave the community; extremely diverse mix of people; viable community with live/work/visiting/shopping; Asian immigrant in outer boroughs coming back to Chinatown (attracted to Manhattan Chinatown services and resources, feel comfortable, know the goods, speak the language; availability of food – cheap, great variety.

Cultural Institutions: preserve library on East Broadway between Market and.....; preserving educational assets in Chinatown (e.g. YMCA)

Business: Affordability for businesses; small businesses and small restaurants with cheap food; most (94%) of Chinatown businesses are small, a large number of them focus on residents, cater to the community; "small town" feel - mom and pop stores; vibrant food and produce markets, diverse retail markets; affordability of goods; keeping Chinatown as a bargain area, "cheap" stores; self-sustained businesses on E. Broadway;

Architectural and neighborhood character: tenement housing, small, narrow streets, street furniture, places to sit; grocery stores, restaurants; preserving Chinese businesses/signage; interesting streetscape, street life; colorful.

Public spaces: Parks for seniors; Seward Park; preserve parks; open spaces for multiple generations

Geographic location: Connection to the surrounding neighborhoods (proximity to Little Italy, civic center etc.)

**2. What changes, positive or negative, have you seen in Chinatown/your neighborhood in the last 10 years?
Where?**

Development: Affordable housing being lost to luxury housing; Buildings are being demolished and replaced by an increasing number of hotels and luxury condominiums; Conversion of buildings to hotels affecting neighborhood negatively; Displacing low-income community.

Many tall buildings have gone up; Creating new residential buildings, but there is no low-income housing; Perspective of what is affordable varies depending on how you look at it; Lead to displacement - "80/20" [development] for the "rich"; Many luxury apartments are unoccupied - should be regulations to make better use of them.

"What are the benefits of a hotel? None, but they look nice." Not completely against hotels but government should make sure the locals are taken care of.

People are speaking out against discriminatory development policies favoring rich people and tourists, not residents; Demanding accountability. "Shanghai was built by Chinese, Chinatown should be run by Chinese... Chinatown is being destroyed by people who don't belong here."

Existing housing

Rents have continued to increase; Building improvements cause rent to increase and people must leave. This happened to neighbors. People can't afford higher rent, move to Brooklyn – Sunset Park (8th Ave and 18th Ave).

Gentrification

Chinatown is a place for low-income immigrants but this is changing due to gentrification: they are being forced out; Residents/workers have for a long time contributed to society but after the economic crisis people are losing jobs and not receiving services.

Gentrification of Lower East Side; Concerns about the increasing cost of living; New developments catering to new residents: bike lanes, bike shops, coffee shops; Fewer Chinese people – other people coming in who can afford higher rents.

Reason still living here is because there is no other choice: overcrowded, not livable for residents (5+ in one room); Can't live elsewhere because don't know the language; Nothing has gotten better, only for rich people.

Bars/Nightlife

More bars – affects people living about bars – noisy; Bars and restaurants diminishing culture; Bars and galleries out of context; Area above Delancey/Houston, Allen/Clinton "Hell Square" "so full of bars it's disgusting"; "Night tourism" some people feel like they can be louder in poorer neighborhoods.

Illegal subdivisions (SROs)

Illegal subdivisions put lives in danger (fires); Displaced residents get placed in shelters far from here.

Economic development

Closing of Pathmark; Garment factories are gone; Jeweler/ wedding gown industries are growing; Increase in the number expensive stores; Cafes do not serve local community, too expensive; No effort to adjust to new economy to help local businesses; A lot of the businesses cannot afford the rents; Only a few of the big businesses are left; There are so many Chinatowns – one in Brooklyn and one in Queens; A lot of businesses are leaving and they're not coming back; Chinese theater on Bowery closed down; Fewer restaurants, more souvenir stores, sale of knock-offs; BIDs pay for street cleaning, the government should pay; BID = manufactured culture. "How do tourists want to see Chinatown?"

Buses

Number of bus companies, bus traffic negatively affecting residential quality of life (idling in front of schools; near Confucius Plaza; Issues with casino buses; Buses also block bike lanes); Issue surrounding buses (people need them but standards aren't good); Recognize that buses might have local economic development benefits through

connecting Chinese communities all over but need to strike a balance between economic development opportunities and quality of life for existing residents.

Loss of bus industry (Greyhound); Buses driven away by the city – tour buses used to stop here. Park Row still closed today; Need for better bus service; Government closure of tourist bus hurts business; Big bus companies push out Chinese bus companies.

Traffic

Big traffic problem in Chinatown; Too much congestion of buses and cars; Closure of Park Row – impact on local businesses in terms of accessibility.

Parking

The biggest issue is parking. Police Plaza parking used to be used by Chinatown folks; Many families used to come to eat, now not enough parking for families; They cannot park their cars so they shop somewhere else.

Citi Bike bicycle share program

Unsure of future effect; New bike lanes (but not easy to navigate); Bike lanes remove [curbside] parking which hurts business (more parking spaces= more shoppers= better local economy).

Public space

Privatization of public space. Recreational/open spaces seem to be reserved for organized activities for people not in the neighborhood (soccer leagues, which require payment, e.g. Columbus Park); Sarah Roosevelt Park – same thing (fields even locked up when not in use); East River/esplanade - development along the East River is beautiful but worry about future effect.

Sidewalks/Vendors

Congestion on sidewalks due to black market vendors; Shop displays extending to sidewalk; Closing down streets [for street markets?] is not a good idea; Street markets - e.g. Philipino market - kill bakeries when streets are closed.

Culture

Losing real culture; Lost traditions (number of flags restricted at Chinese New Year).

Sanitation

Concerned about sanitation (especially restaurants, leftover food being left in garbage bags making streets unsanitary). If Chinatown is cleaner more people will come and support businesses. There should be tourist here!

Safety

Restaurants/small businesses closing earlier due to fear of crime; Thefts of businesses on East Broadway; Need safer streets, particularly important for older people.

3. How would you like to see Chinatown and its surrounding areas develop in the future? For what? In what way? In which areas?

Development

New development tends to mean displacement. Need to focus on the preservation of the community (housing, culture, etc.). Any new development should reflect the needs of the community and improve housing conditions for those who live there; maintain unique characteristics of Chinatown;

More affordable buildings, with commercial on ground floor; more buildings for the existing low-income community, those that aren't just here for a couple of days and leave; low-income housing for immigrants; senior housing; more public housing; 100% affordable housing on public land; government should build affordable housing on SPURA (only 200 of 1,000 units are for those making \$48,000 and under/year); definition of

affordability is too high - the average income in Chinatown is much lower; shouldn't be building luxury housing; can develop taller buildings but must incorporate affordable housing;

“What Chinatown do we want in the future” - no other Chinatown in the world has waterfront access.... embrace the idea that the area can feel free of congestion.

Better management of growth and development; examine tools for regulating land-use and infill development; development should consider people that are existing residents, not just benefitting private developers; the Chinatown community should be the loudest voice in changes; Chinatown needs political power and focus.

Existing housing

More protection for low-income tenants: no harassment from landlords, no evictions. Protect public housing.

Public space

Open space for residents to use; more open space/parks /entertainment space for kids and old people; stop land grabs of remaining public space (NYCHA and otherwise).

Economic development

Protect smaller businesses serving existing residents (grocery stores, fish stores, meat stores, restaurants) by keeping rents affordable; encourage more small business development; support of permits for small businesses; supermarket; open businesses along Mott Street; include manufacturing in zoning; protect street vendors; more restaurants are needed to attract tourists; more local job opportunities; some requirement regulating amount of bars.

Parking and circulation

More parking: free parking should start earlier; re-open Park Row to stimulate business

Buses

Bus terminal under the FDR, South Street; zoning recommendations to require bus companies to have a storefront or whatever agency oversees buses (safety concerns); need for better bus service

Cultural institutions

Affordable space for cultural activities; develop a performing arts center in Chinatown - Lowe's Canal Street Theatre (Ludlow and Canal) empty for over 30 years; parades should be run by the locals; more free arts events (film screenings, performances); more schools; preservation of markets, community and cultural centers that cater to the immigrant community; youth need to be involved in community organizations.

AFFORDABILITY

1. What is your biggest concern about housing or small businesses in Chinatown and its surrounding areas?

Housing

“Affordable” is not affordable. Affordability standard city uses for new development (Area Median Income) doesn't reflect local AMI (many residents make under \$30,000- applies to all populations of color in the area); government is not doing anything to protect affordability in the area – allowing developers to build hotels when land should be developed for affordable housing ; government should take the most responsibility (through special zoning for Chinatown); demolition; rent increases, evictions, displacement are the biggest concern especially when renovations are happening; landlord harassment/ hiring of private companies to harass tenants; proposed NYCHA infill development.

Businesses

Space and issues of affordability; commercial rents are too high; existing businesses that are serving area are getting priced out - restaurants, groceries, fish markets, food markets continue to close due to high rents; landlords charge high commercial rents in buildings with rent stabilized/rent controlled apartments, e.g. on Pell Street, to make up for low rental income from residential units; new businesses moving in sell things local

residents don't use/can't afford; heavy taxes; loss of [curbside] parking because of bike lanes and the Citi Bike bicycle share program; many families used to come to eat, now not enough parking for families; affordability solution needs to include opportunities for people to make more money.

CULTURE AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

1. *Would you like to see certain buildings and places that have historic and/or cultural importance protected from new development? If so, which buildings? Which places?*

Buildings

Bowery – HSBC; New York Public Library on Canal Street; Confucius Plaza; Dr. Shan Xai Sen lived in Chinatown (research where he resided and preserve building); Buildings that deserve to be protected have already been demolished e.g. theater on the Bowery/Hester Street;

Protect property owners – don't just preserve the buildings, but also the people who live there; Preservation of "CORE" – watch out for increasing costs as a result of designations; Needs to be clear communication about what designations mean and how they impact everyone. Balance preservation and affordability – consider places for higher density and balance with areas for preservation;

Places

Mott Street, Pell St, East Broadway, Doyers Street; in the past 10 years, rents have gone up and shops have closed, fewer Chinese people; Chatham Square statues;

Culture

Must maintain the Chinese people – they make Chinese culture; It's not just about the buildings, it's home, it's where we live, it's about the people, culture and families; Increase opportunities for cultural activities in Chinatown; What is available to us? We need something more cultural e.g. more theater and theater groups for children; A cultural center that inspires all of us to remember the various and diverse cultures/immigrant histories that have left their mark on the Lower East Side, e.g. Flushing Chinatown; Keep libraries open; Green spaces – places to gather and celebrate; Accessible / free spaces; Increase exposure for artisans and craftspeople; Create pathways for connection and understanding between visitors and the cultural heritage of the neighborhood.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

1. *Where do you work and what kind of jobs would you like to see kept or added in Chinatown and its surrounding areas?*

Mostly work in restaurants (Group 9 - Fujianese)

Issues/Needs

Need to make sure that the needs of small businesses are met; If business can't attract shoppers how can you generate jobs? ; If Chinatown is cleaner more people will come and support businesses; there should be tourist here!; Bike lanes take away from parking so it hurts business; Business rents are too high; Protect small businesses by keeping rents affordable; People can't get jobs because of lack of English skills; need more opportunities for ESL and job training; Reopen Park Row to stimulate business; Those who worked in manufacturing in the past are now becoming home attendants and making very little money; Not everyone wants to go for job training - some people are highly trained and have not been able to find work here (e.g. sculptors turned construction workers) - should be able to practice skills and live the American life.

Jobs to be kept

Older restaurants serving multi-generational clientele; Modernize older places but keep character; Still some manufacturing in Chinatown e.g. print shops and on-site bakeries; Keep street vendors, but there needs to be a balance so that they don't divert money from stores; [Designate] areas for Chinatown based food vendors.

Jobs to be added

Whatever new field of business comes into Chinatown, job training, local hiring must be a part of it; Well-paid jobs (livable wages) that are for current residents incorporated with job training; Small business start-ups; Support entrepreneurship; Include manufacturing in zoning; Keep manufacturing space (or convert to affordable housing); Increase of tech jobs in the area - would need training; Prefer more small businesses, e.g. smaller shops, not big businesses like supermarkets; Street fairs for local vendors/businesses; night markets; Need for additional healthcare services in Chinatown? Support for traditional Chinese healthcare methods to be included in western insurance/healthcare system.

Important link between culture and jobs - area can be exploited by big museums but they have no link to the culture...“5000 years of Chinese history”; Community needs to learn the ability to use what they have, understand why they are so unique, utilize the people who have a craft in order to promote the craft itself and the culture but also to demonstrate a value that cannot be found elsewhere in NYC.

Tourism: Why do people come to visit? Protect and enhance unique characteristics to continue to attract tourists.

Build on regional attraction (Brooklyn, Queens, New Jersey) - social connections, shopping for Chinese goods

2. What are the specific types of business you feel are unique to Chinatown's character?

Small businesses*, restaurants, factories; Services for existing residents - grocery stores serving residents that live here, meat stores; Kitchen equipment/lighting - used to be on Bowery but being replaced by bars; Traditional Chinese healthcare supplies and services; East Broadway – Fujiannese shops and restaurants; Restaurants on Mott St serving different food from different areas; Stores that sell traditional Chinese clothes, art, ceramics - mostly for tourists

*In Chinatown – small business may mean 2 or 3 employees

3. Do you feel that the current mix of stores and businesses, including vendors, in Chinatown and its surrounding areas meets your needs? Why? Why not?

Shops on East Broadway and under the Manhattan Bridge sell fresh and cheap fish; Need bookstores, copy places; Businesses should stay open later, except ones for tourists; Should retain Chinatown's “weird quiriness,” avoid homogenization; Don't want coffee shops like Starbucks – too expensive, hurts smaller bakeries; Counterfeit stores should be stopped; Don't want hotels – not necessary, encourage non-Chinese people to move in, don't hire Chinese people (new immigrants don't speak enough English); Whole Foods is too expensive for Chinatown.

Issues

Perceptions of Chinatown as “dirty”; Pro-BID versus anti-BID views represented; Problem is that Chinatown businesses undercut each other; How to bring office workers into Chinatown; Penalize black market customers.

ZONING AND LAND USE

1. What kind of development would you like to prevent from happening in Chinatown and its surrounding areas? Why?

Hotels; Buildings over 20 floors; Condos - shouldn't be building luxury housing; Large retail stores; No big chain stores; Fewer bars, restaurants with liquor licenses.

2. What kind of development would you like to see? How high? How big? Where?

Housing

Preservation & affordability should be at the top of the redevelopment list; Affordable housing development is a priority, but there are only so many apartments that can be built - can't build higher because increase in density will be too great and is not healthy; Need to work together to come up with other lots/ideas because it is not an easy solution; Need to work with government to ensure that new development opportunities go to affordable housing, not hotels; Special permits should include assistance for affordable housing; 60% affordable to local residents; Money given for community development fund; Not enough talk about the NYCHA infill plan; Affordable housing is most important for people over 65 so they can stay in Chinatown (don't have jobs or pension, get money from children); Government should build affordable housing on SPURA: also more public housing (taller towers);

How high? How big? Where?

"Buildings getting taller is inevitable" but be strategic - build taller buildings on wider streets. Prefer buildings of 5-6 floors - traditional Chinatown housing - but if rent is low, don't care if the building is high; Afraid that tall buildings will have higher property taxes which will make rent higher; Don't want tall buildings under the 80/20 Housing Program - not enough affordable units; Build more on Allen Street; Canal Street has too much congestion as is.

Commercial development

Supermarkets, especially since Pathmark has closed; Bookstores, copy places; Areas for Chinatown based food vendors, night markets; Create opportunities for businesses that serve the community; Development that allows small businesses to survive; Impose requirement regulating the number of bars.

Public Space

Provide access to the waterfront

Community facilities

Build more schools; Cultural facilities

Built form

Build nicer looking buildings - new developments are not contextual or aesthetically pleasing, e.g. the glass towers; When new development occurs, it should be creative while respecting the context and history of the community; Protect and enhance unique characteristics of Chinatown, to continue to attract tourists; Artists and creative people can be a way to make positive change.

Parking

Develop bus terminal (under the FDR? South Street?); Replace municipal parking that used to be available at Police Plaza.