

**NOTES FROM THE LAND USE/TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE MEETING
OF THE JAPANTOWN TASK FORCE
1765 SUTTER STREET / RING CENTRAL MEETING
THURSDAY, AUGUST 12, 2021**

COMMITTEE MEMBER PRESENT:

GLYNIS NAKAHARA*, TOMO HIRAI, KENTA TAKAMORI*, RICH HASHIMOTO*, Lori Yamauchi*, Alice Kawahatsu, Karen Kai, Linda Walsh

STAFF PRESENT:

Susie Kagami

OTHERS PRESENT:

Aaron Starr, Sandy Mori*, Yasuyo Satoh, AnnieScott Rogers, Steven Santa Maria*

* Japantown Task Force Board Member

The meeting began at 6:03 p.m.

STAFF/COMMITTEE UPDATES:

CULTURAL DISTRICT / CHHESS

Susie Kagami noted staff is mostly just working on the CHHESS to get it ready for approval, along with the recently launched Co-Creative Hub, which they are now working on branding. The Hub will be a digital and physical launch done in parallel, but details are still being worked out as the project is in its early stages.

JAPAN CENTER MALLS

Lori Yamauchi talked about the Ad Hoc Japan Center Malls committee meeting with Santino DeRose, leasing agent for the Japan Center Mall for Maven Properties. The discussion included discussion on tenancies in the malls, including the issue of YiFang's conditional use application. The meeting also looked to attract more Japanese businesses to the malls and touched on formula retail use. Yamauchi added DeRose also spoke about improving communication moving forward and relayed DeRose was willing to participate in future meetings with the Task Force, whether through the Ad Hoc Committee or other committees.

DeRose also mentioned the hurdles formula retail businesses must get through to open. Yamauchi noted that it could take a year and a half for a business to open. DeRose was hoping to get expedited approvals for these potential tenants, but even with the Prop H expediting approved last year for Neighborhood Commercial Districts, the process is still slow, especially for formula retails. Because of this, there is a mixed message when trying to court foreign brands from making inroads to Japantown; courting them to opening in the neighborhood is fine, but asking them to go through a protracted process isn't appealing.

Yamauchi also noted the discussion touched on attracting Japan based businesses, advising that someone within the Japantown community who can speak Japanese, might be able to help convince a Japanese business to come to Japantown. As one example, he pitched Mensho Ramen, a restaurant seeking to open a second location somewhere in the city could be convinced to look at Japantown if someone from the community were to talk to them in their language.

Mensho currently is not looking at Japantown, but a conversation with the community may convince them to look into it.

Tomo Hirai recalled Karen Kai's comment on Japanese and Japanese American businesses are separate and Japanese American businesses should be also promoted in attracting businesses.

Alice Kawahatsu asked about when YiFang would open. Yamauchi reports he did not. Gynis Nakahara, added she reached out to the YiFang contact last week for an update, including to hear about the separate signage permitting process.

Nakahara also asked if it was normal for YiFang to be paying 9 months of rent despite not being able to open yet. Richard Hashimoto said this is normal practice in the city after a business signs a lease. The business, however, is not charged CAM charges until they open.

PEACE PLAZA

Gynis Nakahara noted everyone is waiting on various information to become available, including the structural report on the Peace Pagoda. More substantial updates are due in September. One concern might be that the renovation will have to be the same weight as the old plaza, lest it trigger additional work to be required. JTF is also working on a Prop 8 Thank You video to commemorate the funding for the renovations and also developing a website to share information on the project to wide community.

Sandy Mori said a community town hall meeting is needed for the end of Summer this year to update the community on the status of the project.

Alice Kawahatsu added that some equipment for the plaza, such as light controls and other things could be located in the garage. The system could be remotely controlled.

Lori Yamauchi wanted to check if the plaza is structurally sound, in light of the building collapse in Surfside, Fla. Richard Hashimoto reports that, despite the leaks from the plaza, the structure is still sound.

NEW BUSINESS:

CITY FORMULA RETAIL PROPOSAL

Aaron Starr, manager of legislative affairs for the San Francisco Planning Department, spoke on formula retail policy changes for the Japantown NCD. Based on two issues - one being made aware of Japantown's issues with courting new businesses, and the other being a ramen shop being unable to open in the Marina District due to being formula retail. Current rules define any business with 11 or more businesses worldwide to be considered "formula use" and would necessitate conditional use approval in an NCD.

The proposal, summarized on a one-page document, would exempt stores located in Japan from being counted among the 11 or more locations definition of formula retail if planning to open in the Japantown NCD. The rule would not exempt businesses from any other conditional use requirements, and if a Japanese company with more than 11 locations located outside of Japan were to apply, the conditional use requirements would still apply. However, the policy would help encourage Japanese businesses to look at Japantown for a location, given they could be exempt from going through the approval process elsewhere in the city.

Starr noted that the Planning Department timeline for applications is around nine months, due to staff backlog and the need to get items scheduled on the Planning Commission calendar. There is no “expedited process” they can do given the volume of work the department must handle. Only after the Planning Department approves a conditional use permit, will other city agencies that need to review an applicant be able to look at it, such as the Department of Building Inspection or the Department of Health. This added effort does deter many businesses from pursuing the permits.

Starr also explained that formula retail rules aren’t designed to be an anti-competition measure, but a way to preserve aesthetics. The rule against formula retail is meant to preserve a local NCD’s character, to prevent every commercial district from looking like every other commercial district in the United States. In Japantown, however, where community members want to see Japanese and Japanese American businesses, allowing formula retail from Japan to come in would potentially make the neighborhood more unique than other neighborhoods.

Combined with Prop H, if the applicant is a ground-floor principally permitted business, the city must approve the application in 30 days.

A common concern over formula retail is that they could out-compete smaller businesses, however Starr argued that formula retail does serve to increase foot traffic. He also noted some businesses simply do not exist in non-formula retail forms, such as banks or super markets. Their presence serves to attract people to the neighborhood through recognition. That foot traffic generated by formula retail could then serve smaller businesses as well.

One downside to implementing this ordinance would be that any notice associated with the conditional use hearing would no longer be sent out to the community. The applicant, if their use is allowed, could apply for a permit and be cleared to open without notice to the neighbors. Prop H also has put on hold neighborhood notification for three years. Conditional Use appeals also go to the Board of Supervisors, which can be easier to get a decision overturned while a regular appeal going to the Board of Appeals will require a four out of five vote to get the decision overturned, and the only way a permit can be overturned is if the Planning Department approved a permit in error.

Steven Santa Maria asked about the specifics on getting this ordinance passed and into the planning code. Starr said this amendment would likely be a footnote to the planning code specifically for the Japantown NCD, and said it should be uncontroversial as long as the Japantown community supports the change. The city attorney has given a tentative yes to the rule change. It is up for the community to ask either the City Supervisor, Mayor or Planning Department to get this ordinance considered for adoption.

Alice Kawahatsu asked how the city could notify the community of the permits being approved even without the conditional use requirements. Starr mentioned that there is a permit notification request that can be assigned by geographic area to be notified of any permit, but this would not necessarily stop anything from being approved. There is also a Block Book Notification that can put a 10 day hold on any permits in an area of concern, but this option costs money.

Lori Yamauchi, asked if exemptions could be relaxed to be more than 11 or more businesses to trigger conditional requirements, especially since not all businesses the community wants to court to Japantown may not necessarily be Japanese businesses. Starr however said the 11 or more locations in the United States cannot be changed, this was voter mandated. There is leeway,

however, on the worldwide rule amended into the code later.

Yamauchi also asked if an economic impact analysis is required for a change like this. Starr noted the Planning Department only has 90 days to vet these changes after they are introduced typically, so an impact analysis is not required unless it is a substantial piece of legislation wherein the Planning Department will be given more time and money to investigate impacts.

Karen Kai expressed concern over whether this rule change could affect other communities, such as Chinatown or Calle 24. The process, however, will hinge on whether the community wants to implement these exceptions or not. Starr noted the Planning Department is not pushing this policy change. At that, the ordinance would only impact the Japantown NCD.

Nakahara and Starr agreed to circle back later on the proposal.

CHHESS FINAL DRAFT

Susie Kagami presented briefly on the final draft of the JCHHESS three to five year strategy plan. The current draft features tweaks made by the city per the city. A glossary was added, but the city has taken out community implementation roles by the city and some timelines for what the city is accountable for. The document will be a living document guiding JTF and Japantown Cultural District to work with the city and other entities on the various projects Japantown is working on.

The process is entering the final stages starting in 2019. The document contains six focus areas shared by the seven other city cultural districts, but the 24 key strategies are developed by the Japantown community for the community. The strategy helps provide funding from Prop E and serves as the main staffing source for the Cultural District and provide a visionary document for potential funders. The strategy has the cultural district working with the SF Arts Commission, Planning Department, MOEWD and MOHCD, and requires the Cultural District to be accountable to the MOHCD.

Doables in progress includes Japantown Preservation & Development Vision Master Plan, Community Land Stewardship, Co-Creative Hub, Small Business Assistance Center, which is mostly COVID recovery at this point in time.

Currently Kagami is presenting the latest draft to the JTF board and various committees while the MOHCD is also reviewing the draft internally. Kagami hopes to have a townhall meeting presenting the latest draft in late August for the larger community. September will be taken to reach out and rally support and aim for final adoption in October.

Steven Santa Maria noted the placeholders in the document. Kagami said MOHCD will be addressing them to cite the importance of the strategy, but what is on the draft now speaks to the actual strategies to be implemented.

Karen Kai asked if the community will be given ample time to be vetted by the larger community. She noted given how extensive the document is, the draft should go out earlier and in a digestible format, especially when it's a short timeline where community members may be hesitant to bring up their concerns so as not to hold up the process. Kagami noted that the drafting process has reached out to 30 or so Japantown organizations and has extensively met with ten organizations, including JETRO, JCCCNC and JCYC and undergone four revisions. Kagami said the community likely has a good sense of what the document is about at this time, especially since the report also is based on the previously vetted JCHESS. However, Kagami does plan to take this latest draft to the community as well after the committee and JTF board.

Kai also asked for elaboration on tenant assistance done by the Small Business Assistance Center, especially landlord-tenant advocacy. Yamauchi noted the advocacy piece is broadly spoken to in the report, it is not being specifically implemented at this time. What the JTF has been doing so far, according to Kagami, is assisting tenants through grants and translation services, as well as providing safety and awareness tips. Yamauchi also noted Max Nihei was hired for the Small Business Assistance Center in partnership with the JCBD.

Alice Kawahatsu noted Steve Nakajo's Executive Director's message in the JCHHESS contained slang not known to a lay audience. She advised the piece could be edited to be in a more formal business format. Kagami said she would take that back to Nakajo.

COMMITTEE MEMBER NOMINATION

Glynis Nakahara nominated Steven Santa Maria to the Committee.

Santa Maria said he is interested in infrastructure and transportation. He hopes to adapt his own experience having visited and lived in Japan and experiencing their city layouts and transportation infrastructure.

Lori Yamauchi asked for more on Santa Maria's involvement with the Japantown community. Santa Maria said he became involved in the community as a college student in UC Davis as a member of the Japanese American Student Society. After graduating, he joined Nakayoshi, a program of the San Francisco JAACL. He then worked on event coordination for various community organizations within Japantown. Santa Maria also co-owns a sake business with Graig Inaba who is also active in the community.

Karen Kai seconds the nomination, approved unanimously.

OSAKA WAY IMPROVEMENTS

Glynis Nakahara said the state allocated \$5 million for improvements for Osaka Way (the Buchanan Mall). Conversations are currently looking at where the money can be allocated to in the City.

The funds were initially secured by Phil Ting's advocacy and Steve Nakajo and Sandy Mori are working on a thank you to him. Meanwhile, Jon Osaki is working with Ting's office to do a public press announcement on an as of yet to be determined date.

Sandy Mori noted this will be a big project that entails community planning process, similar to the Peace Plaza renovation. The Nihonmachi Parking Corporation, JCBD, the family of Ruth Asawa, Arts Commission, and the property owners along the mall. Mori said she hope to have a discussion with key representatives in the outset, but also have a full community input process similar to the Peace Plaza process.

Karen Kai expressed she hopes for a broader community process than the Peace Plaza project, given her wish to be on that planning committee. She cited she was denied a seat at the Peace Plaza committee despite her credentials due to the fact she is not a board member of the Task Force. She noted she was among the founding members of the Friends of the Origami Fountains. She also said representatives for Rai Okamoto, the original architect of the pedestrian mall should be represented. Kai added the mall was technically called the Nihonmachi Pedestrian Mall and Okamoto's representatives might have concern renaming the mall "Osaka Way."

Nakahara asked if Okamoto's office was still active. Kai said the architect representing Okamoto's firm should still be able to be contacted.

Tomo Hirai asked if the work to be done would be based on the assessment the Department of Public Works initiated several years ago to examine a renovation. Lori Yamauchi notes that the CHHESS report also mentions a concept plan by the JCBD. She also recalls The Center had sponsored a study on the mall as well. Nakahara imagines there will be a need to assess all the work done on potential renovations. Mori adds that a conversation is also needed with the various city departments to identify their respective roles to see how the money is allocated from the State.

Kai, regard the project funded by The Center, a contest was held in collaboration with the NPC, but the plan was never implemented due to a political issue. The funding meant for the project was instead used to develop the Japantown History Walk and shelve the plan presented to The Center.

Linda Walsh asked if the money was restricted to structural improvements or if it could also be used for cultural purposes. Mori said she has not seen specific wording on the funds and cannot say.

DISCUSSION ON PARKLET(S)

Kenta Takamori wished to check the committee's thoughts on parklets in Japantown. Parklets, while aimed at helping restaurants, face several controversies in the public forum including concerns over safety or aesthetics, the reduction of on-street parking or providing unfair advantages to merchants with access to curbside spaces. We just wanted to survey the community and acknowledge it's a fluid issue.

Linda Walsh felt the outdoor seating on Osaka Way are great. They help make the street seem much livelier.

Steven Santa Maria hasn't used them in Japantown, but has enjoyed them elsewhere in the city. He notes that they do become a source of blight if not cared for, however, and may become a safety issue. He said whoever manages the space should take care of their parklets.

Karen Kai has used the parklet at Paina and said they have done a good job. She asked how the current parklets being erected now compared to the standards set in the pre-pandemic parklet program, which had more regulations. She notes that parklets take up parking and are often empty during the day while surrounding merchants would want that space for parking. She also added the craftsmanship of the parklets vary, with some looking unsafe or unsanitary. She mentioned a fiber glass roof on one parklet ripped off due to the wind and flew into the street.

Alice Kawahatsu used the parklets in Japantown. She initially had concerns over whether the homeless would camp in them, but they have so far remained good for attracting more foot traffic to the neighborhood. She feels safer just taking food home since she lives in the neighborhood, but the parklets have worked out when she has eaten in one. She does, however, sometimes feel unsafe when there is a lot of foot traffic or cars passing by. She does hope to be able to rely on parklets if she ever restarts her food tour business in Japantown.

Gylnis Nakahara listed off some of the safety concerns she's read, which includes access for emergency personnel, others feel they are a "terrible traffic accident waiting to happen." In

addition to that, she mentioned the Planning Department is working on design guidelines for the parklets, which focus on access for the disabled. She added that, now that parklets are a more permanent facet of the street, more money may be invested in them to make them look nice or structurally sound. She also notes that Los Angeles and New York have modular parklet buildings, which are nicer and robust, but she noted San Francisco's hilly topography may make it more difficult to implement them.

Tomo Hirai mentioned the parklets taking up the parking spaces on the street could be a less of an issue given the parking availability in the parking garage.

Takamori said another topic he wanted to bring up was safety for curb access, narrowing bike lanes and narrowing the street. He also spoke on equity for merchants, where having access to the street gives an unfair advantage to businesses with no curbside access. The access the city provides to restaurants in allowing the use of public space may have been necessary during the worst days of the pandemic, but he felt further consideration is required as parklets become a more permanent fixture in the city. Kai noted she does see cars double parking next to parklets, presenting a safety concern, she also added that restaurants in the mall do face challenges not having access to the sidewalk outside directly.

Takamori feels there's no single strong feeling on the parklets within the committee, which was what he expected. He asked the committee to keep the parklets in mind as they go around Japantown. Kawahatsu also noted that the security cameras in Japantown are aimed at the new crosswalk as well.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

Alice Kawahastu reported that the unsafe sidewalk pavement next to Nihonmachi Terrace has been fixed. No more threat of tripping.

Linda Walsh reported on findings from the traffic surveys the community conducted with the help from Walk SF and summer interns. The survey shows that some improvements could be made on Post Street at the Webster and Buchanan Street crossings. Striping could be updated to make them visible and safer for pedestrians, especially those using mobility aids such as wheelchairs. Walk SF is willing to help push the city to implement these improvements. Auditory signals are also being tested, some of them sounded low, but ambient noise helps control how loud the signals sound.

The new Geary crossing at Buchanan is installed, along with new trees. The light remains red until someone presses the button to cross, but Walsh, Kawahatsu and Glynis Nakahara were expecting the crossing to be timed to help slow traffic down and called for the lights to be changed to timed lights. While people have started to use the new crosswalk, people are still jaywalking. Walsh asked if a fence in the median could help prevent jaywalkers, but Kawahatsu noted a previous fence had to be removed after too much trash got stuck on it. Walsh still felt it was too unsafe to let people cross on the crest of the hill between Laguna and Buchanan Streets. Kawahatsu also noted that the security cameras in Japantown are aimed at the new crosswalk as well.

One stop light on the new crossing is blocked by a branch, Walsh has called 311 to get that trimmed, but that has yet to happen. There are three other traffic lights, so it is not a crucial issue.

Walsh noted a parent from Rosa Parks Elementary mentioned an issue with a crossing at Willow Street by the elementary school's play yard. Walsh said JTF could help advocate for improvements at that crossing as well.

Kawahatsu thanked Walsh for helping to coordinate the interns from the National Japanese American Historical Society to conduct the surveys, including the training to become aware of the traffic issues seniors face living in the area.

Walsh also added the city had reduced the one-block stretch of Geary going up the hill to 25 miles an hour, while the stretch coming down was 35 mph. She said the single 25 mph block is largely ignored while most drivers adhered to the 35 mph limit. She wished for a more consistent span of road to be slated for the 25 mph speed limit.

Kawahatsu said it is ultimately up to the community to decide on what priorities it wants the the city address on pedestrian safety improvements.

Nakahara asked if the data from the surveys would be available. Walsh said she turned in one set to Walk SF, but is currently copying the others before sending them to Walk SF. Nakahara asked if the data was potentially being collated by Walk SF as well.

PRESERVATION + DEVELOPMENT MASTER PLAN

Yamauchi has no update, she is working on charter. She has also reached out to JARF and will be speaking with them next week.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

None

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Glynis Nakahara announced Thursday, Aug. 19, League of Women Voters will cover the redistricting of San Francisco. Features speaker Jonathan Mehta Stein of California Common Cause, and is supported by SF Rising and Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Asian Law Caucus. To register, visit:

https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZAlce2prjgjHdQev8c3ux_EaxayD2tbYpr3

Nakahara recommended to Steve Nakajo that JTF should send the info out as a PSA.

Karen Kai noted this is part of a 10 year cycle, and Japantown needs to advocate for its boundaries since the District 5 boundaries look gerrymandered, but are actually shaped that way to keep in cultural assets together in the same district. Previous district line proposals also proposed splitting the community at Geary as well.

The meeting ended at 7:51 p.m.