

# Community Heritage

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## 2.1 Existing Conditions

The Japantown neighborhood of San Francisco has been home to the city’s historic Japanese community for over a century. The neighborhood is one of three remaining historic “Japantown” communities in the United States (the others are located in San Jose and Los Angeles). As such, San Francisco’s Japantown is a cultural mecca for Nikkei located in the region, throughout California, and nationwide. Japantown is akin to a living ecosystem – it is a vital, resource-rich environment of people, places, activities, and community heritage that are all intimately connected and involved in maintaining cultural identity.

The community heritage of Japantown is comprised of a number of elements found in the neighborhood.

These elements include:

- People of Nikkei cultural identity as well as people of other cultural groups that are historically rooted in the Japantown area;
- Customs, traditions, events, language, literature, and arts that are important to cultural identity;
- Businesses and trade that contribute to day-to-day cultural life-ways such as cuisine, apparel, and recreation;
- Community-serving organizations that support social cohesion and that promote cultural identity; and
- Physical heritage such as buildings, sites, objects, and groups of properties that transmit an essence of cultural identity and history.



Source: SF Public Library

The historic YWCA founded by Japanese Americans and designed by Julia Morgan continues to house an important community-based organization, Nihonmachi Little Friends Child-care Center.

In order to inform community and cultural preservation strategies in the Japantown BNP, information was gathered from several sources regarding Japantown's community heritage. These sources include: the Japantown Task Force's Cultural Preservation Report for Japantown, San Francisco; a historic context statement prepared by historian Donna Graves; a historic/cultural resources survey conducted by Page & Turnbull, Inc.; and meetings of the Preservation Working Group, a community-based advisory body to the Japantown BNP Steering Committee. Additional information was gathered by the Planning Department through research, field surveys, interviews, focus groups, community meetings, and public hearings.



Source: Buddhist Church of America

The Buddhist Mission was housed in a traditional San Franciscan victorian.

### *Historic Overview of Japantown*

During California's early history, San Francisco served as the primary gateway and settlement site for Japanese immigrating to the continental U.S. In the latter part of the 19th century, thousands of Japanese settled in the Chinatown, South of Market, and South Park areas of San Francisco. However, they were displaced by the earthquake and fires of 1906, as were hundreds of thousands of people throughout San Francisco. During the period of citywide reconstruction that followed, some Japanese returned to South Park, but the vast majority relocated to the Western Addition, a Victorian-era streetcar suburb of middle-class houses, shops, schools, religious buildings, and theaters that were not effected by the earthquake or fires in 1906. Japanese seeking new homes found that exclusionary housing practices, commonplace in San Francisco at the time, did not extend into parts of the Western Addition.

It was in this older 19th century neighborhood of the Western Addition that Japanese reestablished homes, businesses, institutions, and community, forming the culturally distinctive neighborhood of Nihonjin Machi, or "Japanese person town," as it was called by Nikkei. The heart of Nihonjin Machi was the area bounded by Geary, Webster, Bush, and Laguna Streets, although Nikkei presence extended over a 30-block area, as far as Presidio, California, McAllister and Gough streets. Many Japanese stores, personal services, and professionals were found concentrated in storefronts along Post and Buchanan Streets, the primary commercial corridors of Nihonjin Machi, as well on Fillmore Street. Other Nikkei businesses, services, schools, churches, and hotels operated in the houses of the neighborhood.

By the 1920s and 1930s, the growing influence and resource base of several established Japanese institutions allowed them to construct dedicated structures in





Source: National Japanese American Historical Society

Japanese-owned businesses were forced to close shop (above). Years later, some business owners were able to reopen (above right).



Source: Bancroft Library



Source: Nisei Fishing Club

The cultural diversity of the neighborhood that grew during the 50s and 60s is reflected in this group photo of the Nisei Fishing Club.

Nihonjin Machi. These Japanese schools, churches, and social and cultural halls became new cornerstones of the neighborhood; Nikkei institutions also converted 19th century buildings such as temples and mansions. While the Western Addition area was home to cultural groups other than Japanese, including residents of European and/or Jewish ancestry, (many of whom were previously established in the area), Filipino Americans, and African Americans in the nearby Fillmore neighborhood, the character of Nihonjin Machi was decidedly Nikkei. The neighborhood reached its zenith, in total numbers and in geographic extent of Nikkei population, businesses, and community and social resources, by about 1940. The cultural community of Nihonjin Machi thrived despite legal restrictions such as the Alien Land Act of 1913, which disallowed Japanese and other “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from owning property, and the Immigration Act of 1924, which curtailed immigration from Japan.

However, at the time of the United States’ entry into World War II, the U.S. government ordered the internment of nearly all persons of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast, an act for which the federal government officially apologized generations later. Many scholars viewed the action of interning American citizens of Japanese ancestry as one of the most shameful acts of the United States government. With no apparent alternatives, Nikkei of San Francisco’s Nihonjin Machi, as well as other “Japantowns” in California and the Western U.S., made arrangements as they could for their homes, businesses, and possessions (or lost them in many cases) and prepared their families for internment. From 1942 to 1945, approximately 110,000 Japanese were detained in internment camps located throughout the Western U.S. During that time, there were no Nikkei in Nihonjin Machi.

When the three-year internment ended at the end of the war, a Nikkei diaspora resulted. While many Japanese returned to the neighborhoods that they had been forced to leave, others relocated to other Japantowns on the West Coast, to other neighborhoods and communities throughout the U.S., or to Japan. Consequently, the Nikkei population in San Francisco’s Western Addition was not as great as it had been before the war, and the community faced challenges in retaining social cohesion. The name of the neighborhood as known to Nikkei also changed to reflect the more dispersed character of the postwar community, from Nihonjin Machi to Nihonmachi, or “Japantown.” Nonetheless, the neighborhood continued to function as the cultural and commercial heart for Nikkei in San Francisco.



Source: Japanese American National Library

Looking northeast above the new Geary Boulevard (above), this photo captures the Japan Trade Center's construction over three city blocks, part of Redevelopment Area A-1. The community organizes and protests eviction (right).



Source: Japanese American National Library

Overall, the postwar population of the Western Addition increased and became even more ethnically and culturally mixed. During the war, the African American community of the nearby Fillmore neighborhood grew significantly, as San Francisco's wartime industries attracted new workers to the city, including many from the Southern U.S.. The wartime expansion of the African American community, the postwar return of Nikkei to the neighborhood, and an influx of other groups such as Filipinos and Koreans, resulted in an even more diverse cultural atmosphere than had existed previously in the Western Addition. Consequently, the area became known as San Francisco's "Little United Nations."

By the 1950s, local agencies had identified San Francisco's Western Addition as the site of one of the first federally funded urban renewal projects in the nation. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, vast swaths of Western Addition neighborhoods (including parts of the Japantown-Fillmore area) were cleared by the local redevelopment agency for eventual new development. These actions resulted in displacement of thousands of established residents and scores of businesses, razing of hundreds of structures, and disruption of social fabric. The criticism leveled by the Western Addition community at these outcomes led directly to redevelopment agency policy shifts related to displacement of people, rehabilitation and relocation of older buildings, and involvement of the local community in project planning. The redevelopment of the Western Addition was especially painful for those individuals and families who also suffered greatly with the internment during WWII.

Occurring under the auspices of the local redevelopment agency, but with increasing influence from the Nikkei community, the urban renewal of Japantown displayed a cultural focus that was unusual for redevelopment projects. From the 1960s to the 1980s,



much of the heart of Japantown was reconstructed with culturally-focused designs and uses. The earlier stages of urban renewal in Japantown generally resulted in large-scale complexes, including apartments and a commercial mall. Later phases tended to result in smaller projects that were integrated into the neighborhood and that addressed specific community needs. These included a pedestrian commercial plaza with public art (Buchanan Mall), Nikkei churches, organizational headquarters, libraries, and a community and cultural center.

The redevelopment of Japantown's physical landscape during the mid to late 20th century occurred during a time when the social and political landscapes for Nikkei also changed in important ways. Decades-old restrictions on "alien" immigration and property ownership were lifted in the 1950s, and exclusionary housing practices and anti-miscegenation laws were struck down in the 1960s. Movements and campaigns to obtain official redress from the U.S. government for wartime internment were momentous in the 1970s and 1980s. Although significant changes in Nikkei social fabric that occurred over time led to closures of schools, churches, and organizations in Japantown, many other established institutions remained vital. In addition, new organizations and groups formed to fill the service voids and to meet the changing, diversifying needs of the multi-generational Nikkei cultural community.

Over more than a century, generations of Nikkei— Issei, Nisei, Sansei, and Yonsei (the first, second, third and fourth generations of Japanese in America)— have grown and changed along with the Japantown neighborhood of San Francisco. Historic and cultural ties have deepened and strengthened even as the community has faced challenges to its social and physical fabric. Now, San Francisco's Japantown neighborhood continues for-

ward into its second century, representing and carrying a continual record of community heritage in its people, places, events, values, and memories.

#### *Historic Themes of Japantown*

"Themes" are ways to organize and understand information about events, activities, people, communities, and patterns of change that have influenced historic and cultural development of an area. Japantown is associated with themes that relate to the broader history of the Western Addition area of San Francisco, as well as with themes that relate to the historic and cultural development of San Francisco's Japantown neighborhood and the Nikkei cultural community.

Historic themes related to the Western Addition of San Francisco include:

- Early History of the Western Addition, 1880s – 1906.
- Resettlement & Recovery, 1906 – 1920s.
- San Francisco's "Little United Nations," 1920s – 1950s.
- Urban Renewal, 1950s – Present.

Historic themes related to the development of the Japantown neighborhood and the Nikkei community include:

- Early Japanese History in San Francisco, 1880s – 1906.
- Japanese Settlement in the Western Addition, 1906 – 1920s.
- Nihonjin Machi of San Francisco, 1920s – 1942.
- World War II Internment, 1942 – 1945.



Source: Lucille Kishine

The art and practice of Japanese tea ceremonies continue to be taught and honored in Japantown (above). The cobblestone "river" and origami fountains in Buchanan Mall (below) were designed and constructed by the community and represent Japantown's cultural identity.



Source: Sumi Honnami

- Nikkei Return to Japantown, 1945 – 1960s.
- Redevelopment of Japantown, 1960s – 1980s.
- Rediscovering Nihonmachi, 1980s – Present.



The Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California is one property that appears eligible to be listed as a traditional cultural property.

### *Community Heritage Features of Japantown*

Japantown's community heritage features are elements of the neighborhood that provide important connections to culture and history through use, association, design, and memory. Community heritage features include institutions, businesses, buildings, objects, and sites that have special meanings, functions, and roles in sustaining and continuing the cultural community of Japantown. Other aspects of cultural identity include: arts, literature, language, religion, traditions, customs, events, and day-to-day life-ways such as recreation, cuisine, and clothing.

The community heritage features of Japantown include the neighborhood's many active institutions, organizations, businesses, and sites that are important to the functioning cultural community. Many of these active community heritage features of Japantown are historically rooted and many are associated with physical properties of historic, cultural, and/or architectural interest. The most prominent of these active community heritage features have central roles in the lives of community members. These include schools, churches, organizations, and institutions whose primary objectives are to maintain social cohesion, retain aspects of cultural heritage and promote cultural identity. Other active features of Japantown's community heritage are less prominent, yet still important, in supporting the cultural neighborhood. These include markets, restaurants, personal services, and social gathering places that provide the background for the cultural community's ongoing existence.

Japantown's community heritage features also include properties that were associated in the past to important cultural institutions, organizations, businesses, and/or

activities. These past community heritage features provide connections to cultural identity through memory and interpretation; they can also hold important connections to general themes in San Francisco history such as neighborhood development and immigration/settlement patterns. They include a variety of physical properties in the Japantown neighborhood, such as houses, apartments, stores, institutions, open spaces, streets, art objects, and groups of properties. While some past community heritage features are also active and functioning features of Japantown's community heritage, the significance of other community heritage features lies entirely in the past. (For the purposes of identifying past community heritage features, the "past" period is defined as pre-1960.) See Figure 2.1: Map of Community Heritage Features of Japantown.

### *National Park Service Programs*

The National Park Service provides guidelines and evaluative criteria for identifying properties that have special historic and cultural significance, and can help support Japantown's community heritage features. One type of property defined by the National Park Service as significant is a "traditional cultural property." A traditional cultural property is associated with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that are rooted in that community's history, that are still practiced and valued in the present day, and that are important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of the community. Several of Japantown's active community heritage features appear to qualify as potential traditional cultural properties pursuant to the National Park Service's guidelines and evaluative criteria. Determination of a community heritage feature as a traditional cultural property requires verification by the cultural community, as well as concurrence by

Figure 2.1  
Community Heritage Features of Japantown

LEGEND

Japantown BNP Boundary

Currently Active  
Community Heritage Features:

- 1 Hokka Nichi Bei Kai, established late 1800s, built 1980
- 2 Christ United Presbyterian Church, established 1885, built 1975
- 3 Buddhist Church of San Francisco, established 1898, built 1935
- 4 Buddhist Churches of America, established 1899, built 1971
- 5 Uki Sakai Fish Market, established 1906, built 1927, renovated 1965
- 6 Benkyodo Co., established 1906, built 1959 (Japantown Merchant's Association)
- 7 Toriya Restaurant, established c.1906, built 1963
- 8 St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, established 1913, built 1939
- 9 Soko Hardware, established 1925, built 1975
- 10 Joseph Weill / Rosa Parks School, built 1927
- 11 Konko-kyo Church of San Francisco, established 1930, built 1974
- 12 Nichiren Buddhist Church, established c.1930-31, built c.1893
- 13 Sokoji Soto Zen Buddhist Temple, established 1934, built 1984
- 14 Kinmon Gakuen, established 1911, built 1924 (Nihonmachi Little Friends)
- 15 Japanese American Citizens League, est. 1929, built 1975 (Japanese Benevolent Society)
- 16 Japanese / Buchanan YMCA, built 1935
- 17 Japanese Community Youth Council, established c.1970, built c.1893, renovated 2009
- 18 Nihonmachi Little Friends / Japanese YWCA, built 1932
- 19 Kokoro / Sokoji Soto Zen Temple, established 1934 / Ohabei Shalom Temple, built 1895
- 20 Nichi Bei Times, established 1946, built 1972
- 21 St. Francis Square Cooperative Apartments, built 1964
- 22 Post Street town, Fillmore & Octavia Streets (Cherry Blossom Festival), established 1967
- 23 Jagan Center (Ikunobu Ikebana Society of America; Kinochi Lounge; Kinokuniya Bookstore; Ikebana Ikebana; Day of Remembrance, et al.), built 1968
- 24 Peace Plaza & Peace Pagoda, built 1968
- 25 Nihonmachi Terrace, built 1969 (Japanese American National Library, Japanese American Religious Federation)
- 26 Japanese Cultural & Community Center of Northern California, built 1973 (Japanese American Historical Archives; Japantown Arts and Media Workshop; Nobiru-Kai)
- 27 Buchanan Mall / Paper Tree / Fuji Shatsu / Kimochi, built 1972-74
- 28 Osaka Way / Origami Fountains & Rock River, built 1975
- 29 National Japanese American Historical Society, 1980
- 30 Kimochi Home, built 1983
- 31 J-POP Center, to be completed 2009 (Hokubei Mainichi; Radio Mainichi)

Formerly Active (pre-1960)  
Community Heritage Features:

- 32 Yokohama Shokai Art Goods Store, c.1910s
- 33 Saito Art Goods, Kisen Shokai Art Goods, c.1910s
- 34 Hayato Shokai Art Goods, c.1910; Osada Apartments, 1940s-1970s
- 35 Japanese Laundry, c.1910s
- 36 Tamari Boarding House, c.1910s
- 37 Catholic Japanese Home, c.1910s
- 38 Keihin Ryokan Hotel, c.1910s
- 39 Seibi Ryokan Hotel, c.1910s
- 40 Itami Match Repair, c.1910s; Hossai Embroidery, c.1920s-1950s
- 41 Hamumei-kan Boarding House, Nihon Gakuen School, U. Sano Midwifery, c.1910s
- 42 Kinsho-tei Restaurant, c.1910s
- 43 Imai Photo Studio, c.1910s
- 44 Dobashi Shoe Shop, c.1910s
- 45 C. Kobayashi Midwifery, c.1910s
- 46 Nihon Hospital, c.1910s
- 47 Ota Sewing Repair, c.1920s-1940s
- 48 Catholic Mission (St. Francis Xavier), c.1920s
- 49 Sisters' Home (St. Francis Xavier), c.1920s
- 50 Catholic Mission (St. Francis Xavier), c.1920s
- 51 Morning Star Institute, built 1929
- 52 San Francisco Japanese Salvation Army, built 1936
- 53 Osome Sasaki, Carpenter, c.1920s-1970s; Osome Restaurant, c.1970s
- 54 California Cleaners, c.1920s-1970s; Kuratori & Murata Insurance, c.1920s-1940s
- 55 Lotus Beauty Shop, c.1920s-1940s; Suyasu Apartments & Florist, Tokyo Fish Market, c.1950s
- 56 Suzaki Apartments, c.1920-1972
- 57 Isoye Hand Embroidery, c.1920s-1940s
- 58 Terschuren House, occupied by Otokichi Ono family, c.1930s-1940s
- 59 Japanese Catholic Mission (Nichiren Buddhist Church), c.1940s; Isoye Hand Embroidery, c.1950s
- 60 Motoyoshi Photo Studio, c.1940s
- 61 Shirai Tackle & Drug, c.1940s
- 62 T. Sakai Business Services, c.1940s-1950s
- 63 Oino Apartments, c.1940s-1970s
- 64 Japanese Girls' Home (St. Francis Xavier), c.1940s-1970s
- 65 Yamamoto Apartments, 1940s-1970s
- 66 M. Matoi, Optometrist, c.1950s
- 67 Kato Kogyobu Japanese Movies, c.1950s
- 68 Kami Photo Studio, Soko Camera Club, c.1950s
- 69 Kimura Catering, c.1950s
- 70 Ujtown Garage, c.1940s-1970s
- 71 Pine Street Laundry, c.1940s-1950s
- 72 Dr. Togasaki House

Sources: Japantown Task Force, Inc., Cultural Preservation Report for Japantown, San Francisco, December 28, 2004; Page & Turnbull, Inc., Property Documentation Memo, June 6, 2008; D. Graves, San Francisco Japantown Better Neighborhood Plan Historic Context, 1880s-1980s (Draft), April 11, 2008; Planning Department research.

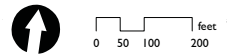




Figure 2.2


**Community Heritage Features  
That Appear Eligible for Listing in the  
National Register of Historic Places**

**LEGEND**

-  Japantown BNP Boundary
-  Property that may qualify as a traditional cultural property\*

\*Requires confirmation by the National Park Service.

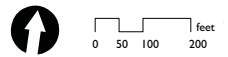
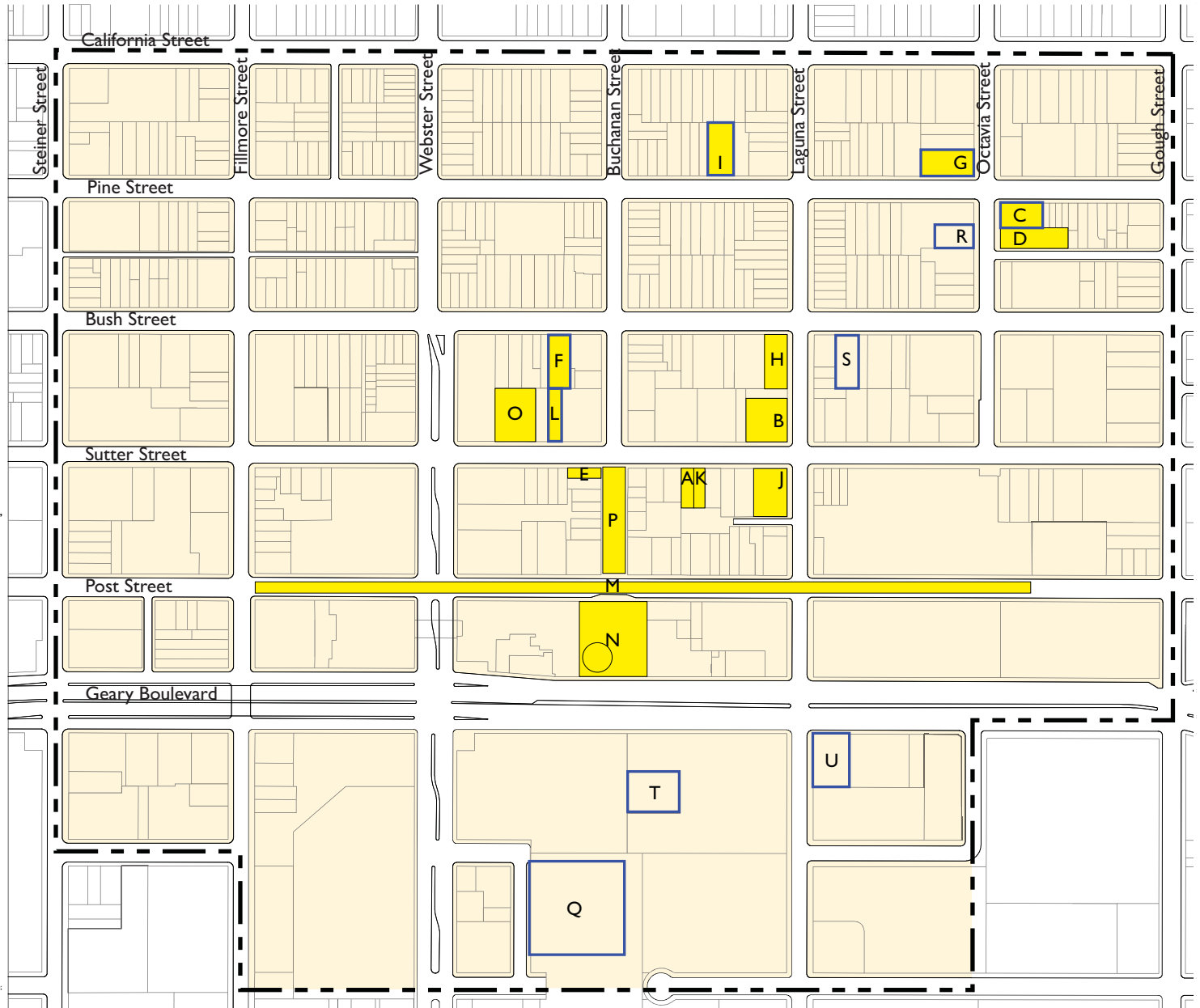
- A Hokka Nichi Bei Kai, est. late 1800s, built 1980
- B Christ United Presbyterian Church, est. 1885, built 1975
- C Buddhist Church of San Francisco, est. 1898, built 1935
- D Buddhist Churches of America, est. 1899, built 1971
- E Benkyodo Co., est. 1906, built 1959
- F Kinmon Gakuen, est. 1911, built 1924 (Nihonmachi Little Friends)
- G St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, est. 1913, built 1939
- H Konko-kyo Church of San Francisco, est. 1930, built 1973
- I Nichiren Buddhist Church, est. c.1930-31, built c.1893
- J Sokoji Soto Zen Buddhist Temple, est. 1934, built 1984
- K Japanese American Citizens League, est. 1929, built 1975
- L Japanese YWCA, built 1932 (Nihonmachi Little Friends)
- M Post Street btwn. Fillmore & Octavia Streets (Cherry Blossom Festival), est. 1967
- N Peace Plaza & Peace Pagoda, built 1968
- O Japanese Cultural & Community Center of Northern California, built 1973
- P Osaka Way / Origami Fountains & Rock River, built 1975

-  Property identified as a historic property\*\*

\*\*Also eligible for listing in the California Register of Historical Resources and in Article 10 of the San Francisco Planning Code.

- C Buddhist Church of San Francisco, est. 1898, built 1935
- G St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, est. 1913, built 1939
- I Nichiren Buddhist Church, est. c.1930-31, built c.1893
- F Kinmon Gakuen, est. 1911, built 1924
- L Japanese YWCA, built 1932
- Q Joseph Weill / Rosa Parks School, built 1927
- R Morning Star Institute, built 1929
- S Kokoro / Sokoji Soto Zen Temple, est. 1934 / Ohabai Shalome Temple, built 1895
- T Japanese / Buchanan YMCA, built 1935
- U San Francisco Japanese Salvation Army, built 1936

Source: Japantown Task Force, Inc., Cultural Preservation Report for Japantown, San Francisco, December 28, 2004; Page & Turnbull, Inc., Property Documentation Memo, June 6, 2008; D. Graves, San Francisco Japantown Better Neighborhood Plan Historic Context, 1880s-1980s (Draft), April 11, 2008; Planning Department research.





the National Park Service, and can lead to listing of the property on the National Register of Historic Places (subject to consent of the property owner).

Another type of property defined by the National Park Service as significant is a “historic property.” A historic property demonstrates a quality of significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, or culture. Properties that have achieved significance within the past fifty years must demonstrate exceptional value to qualify as historic. Several of Japantown’s community heritage features appear to qualify as historic properties pursuant to the National Park Service’s guidelines and evaluative criteria. Other properties, including some that were developed within the past fifty years, merit further research and consideration as potential historic properties. Determination of a community heritage feature as historic can lead to listing of the property on the National Register of Historic Places (subject to consent of the property owner). See Figure 2.2: Community Heritage Features of Japantown That Appear Eligible for Listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

#### SUMMARY OF JAPANTOWN’S COMMUNITY HERITAGE

Following are conclusions regarding the community heritage of San Francisco’s Japantown:

- Japantown’s community heritage encompasses the neighborhood’s entire history, beginning with early periods of development in the Western Addition, and continuing with the history of the Nikkei cultural community, including periods of settlement, resettlement, and renewal, to the present day.
- Active community heritage features are generally located together within the historic, current, and future core of San Francisco’s Japantown (approximately bounded by Bush, Webster, Octavia Streets, and Geary Boulevard).
- There is a high degree of synergy between Nikkei community heritage features (active and past) and Japanese-influenced architecture/design, which contributes to a cohesive cultural community and built environment.
- A number of outstanding cultural landmarks, which may also be considered important functional assets, have been identified in the Japantown neighborhood, and merit recognition, preservation, and consideration in local planning.
- Past community heritage features – found throughout the Japantown neighborhood, but in greater concentrations north of Bush Street, outside of the Redevelopment Areas A-1 and A-2 – warrant further research and evaluation as potential cultural landmarks, historic properties, and/or historic districts.
- The complex legacy of urban renewal in the Japantown area should be further explored when greater historical perspective is gained through the passage of time, and when a wider body of literature exists to inform the study.

## 2.2 Recommendations and Strategies

As the previous section highlights, Japantown is rich in features that reflect the community's heritage and that should be retained and enhanced. In keeping with the four overarching goals of the Japantown BNP, this section describes strategies for maintaining and strengthening the neighborhood's unique cultural character, its community assets, and the heritage that is found in the built environment.

### *Establish a Community-Based Body to Guide Preservation Efforts*

The aspects of the cultural and historic features in Japantown that make them important can be threatened if careful consideration is not given to their preservation and maintenance. Chapter 3: Community and Economic Development describes an "Implementation Organization" that will be responsible for moving forward with the recommendations of the Plan. Particular attention should be placed on implementing strategies that will preserve Japantown's cultural and historic character. An important task of the Implementation Organization will be the formation of a heritage sub-committee to further assess the community heritage features in the neighborhood and determine priorities for preserving Japantown's cultural character. The members of the heritage sub-committee should represent the full range of diversity of the well-established neighborhood community.

### Actions

- Form a sub-committee of the Implementation Organization dedicated to advising the community of the benefits and financial incentives of historic property recognition, and to steering Japantown's historic and cultural preservation strategies.
- Seek advice from local, state, regional and national organizations to learn from their efforts to recognize and preserve cultural character. Formulate steps to incorporate best examples into Japantown efforts.
- Develop educational programs and materials to reach out to Japantown's civic organizations, property owners, residents and interested members of the public, on the importance of retaining properties that exemplify Japantown's history, cultural heritage, and social values.
- Develop relationships with preservation and educational organizations locally, in California, and nationwide, to expand awareness of the significance of Japantown's community heritage.

### *Recognize Important Properties of the Japanese and Japanese American Communities*

*Figure 2.1: Community Heritage Features of Japantown* illustrates the breadth of features that make Japantown a unique cultural place. Generally, these features should be retained and enhanced in order to preserve the overall cultural character of the neighborhood for the current and future community. While much information regarding the historic and cultural character of Japantown was gathered as part of producing this Plan, more research can be undertaken in order to build upon the Plan findings and to implement preservation strategies.

### Actions

- The heritage sub-committee should develop a comprehensive list of historic properties and contribute to the social, cultural, aesthetic and architectural heritage of the Japantown area. Further inventories and analysis should comprehensively research the potential significance of the many past community heritage features that are found in Japantown. The heritage sub-committee should seek assistance in these efforts, including grants and expertise from local preservation organizations, such as San Francisco Architectural Heritage, and others nationwide.
- The heritage sub-committee should pursue appropriate preservation strategies, including further research of cultural character and public outreach, that promote community recognition and appreciation of cultural, historic and architecturally significant buildings within Japantown (as noted in the following section: "Consider Other Preservation Strategies Upon Further Study").
- In cooperation with other Japantown organizations and institutions, the heritage sub-committee should provide property owners and other stakeholders with materials that identify and facilitate the use of economic incentives for the preservation of cultural assets and historic properties.
- Based on the analysis and insight from community groups, as well as input from parties who can advise, the heritage sub-committee should determine which preservation strategies are appropriate to pursue as effective and feasible measures to preserve the cultural character of Japantown.

### Seek Recognition as a National Heritage Area

Japantown should pursue official designation through the National Park Service as a National Heritage Area (NHA). The purpose of a National Heritage Area is to communicate an area's story, preserve the local culture and existing way of life for residents, and make places more accessible to visitors and residents. Japantown appears to be an ideal candidate for this designation because the neighborhood's built form, which includes properties that represent the entirety of Japantown's physical and social history, is a cultural landscape capable of relaying the history of Japanese Americans. The designation of Japantown as a National Heritage Area would have the following benefits:

- Provides technical assistance for federal funding.
- Supports marketing and promotion of Japantown as a heritage tourism destination.
- Has a positive impact on economic development.
- Increases opportunities for federal funding for neighborhood improvements.
- Does not place additional limitations on property development than already exist.

Heritage areas, designated by Congress, do not legally protect properties from adverse change or demolition, nor do they legally restrict change or development of properties with limitations. Because the City of San Francisco's preservation policies require pre-development review for all potential historic properties, official designation of a National Heritage Area does not result in additional scrutiny, but makes it possible for the Japantown community to leverage benefits from its status as a National Heritage Area to be eligible for federal funding. If the Japantown community does not

pursue official National Heritage Area designation, it may pursue creation of a local, regional, or statewide heritage area, which would not be eligible for Congressional funding, however. Heritage areas, whether or not they are designated by Congress, are formed primarily to promote tourism and increase recognition by funding sources.

Four options for National Heritage Areas (or potentially heritage areas at the local, regional, or state levels) have been identified as potentially viable and are described in the following pages. The Implementation Organization's heritage sub-committee should conduct further research to determine if one or more of the options should be pursued.



The Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park (above) and the California Flower Market can become part of the Heritage Area (right).

### OPTION 1: SAN FRANCISCO'S JAPANTOWN AS A NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

The boundary of the potential National Heritage Area should include the area within Japantown BNP boundary and may extend to other sites and areas that are nearby.

### OPTION 2: BAY AREA SITES AS A NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

With further analysis, it could be determined that a heritage area may encompass other areas of San Francisco and the Bay Area, thereby recognizing connections to other significant Japanese and Japanese American





sites within the region. The following sites are some of the places and neighborhoods that are important to the history of Japanese Americans (further research may identify additional sites):

- Angel Island, where immigrants including Japanese first arrived in the continental United States;
- North Beach/Chinatown and South Park, where many Japanese initially settled in San Francisco in the 19th century;
- The Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park, a permanent park attraction that resulted from the Japanese Village exhibit on that location during the World's Fair of 1894;
- The Japanese Cemetery in Colma City, built in 1901 by the Japanese community in San Francisco with funding from Emperor Meiji of Japan;
- Japantown (or Nihonjin Machi, or Nihonmachi), the location of the Japanese community after the earthquake and fires of 1906;
- The California Flower Market, a regional center for Bay Area Nikkei flower growers located in San Francisco, created as a consortium with Chinese and Italian American flower growers in the 1910s;
- The Military Intelligence Service for Japanese Americans Center, located in the Presidio during World War II; and
- The Richmond neighborhood, where many Japanese Americans relocated during the postwar era from the 1950s through 1970s.

**OPTION 3: CALIFORNIA'S JAPANTOWNS AS A NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA**

San Francisco's Japantown would benefit from collaboration with Japantowns in Los Angeles (Little

Tokyo) and San Jose (Japantown) in forming a National Heritage Area. A California's Japantowns National Heritage Area that links the communities would increase the level of awareness and appreciation of Japanese American history in a way that would be more comprehensive and far-reaching than a heritage area of more local or regional nature.

The inclusion of all of the three remaining historic Japantowns in California within a National Heritage Area would allow for greater expression and interpretation of history than could be accomplished through recognition of any individual Nihonmachi. A California's Japantowns National Heritage Area would relate to the statewide development of Japanese community, including: the initial arrival and settlement of Japanese in San Francisco and creation of San Francisco's Nihonmachi; the migration of Japanese to the San Jose area for agricultural work, and the subsequent formation of the Bay Area's second major Nihonmachi; and the settlement of Los Angeles's Japantown after the San Francisco earthquake and fires of 1906, resulting in the largest Nihonmachi in the state.

**OPTION 4: CALIFORNIA STATEWIDE SITES AS A NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA**

Another alternative is a California Statewide Sites National Heritage Area, which would encompass all associated sites and areas within the state, and which would highlight many places in California that have been important parts of Japanese history outside of the three major Japantowns of San Francisco, San Jose, and Los Angeles, including rural settings and cultural landscapes. Potential sites include: the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony Site (the first known Japanese settlement site in California outside of San Francisco); agricultural properties in the Bay Area and Central



There are at least eight locations that could be incorporated into the Japanese American Heritage Area throughout the state (Option 4).

Valley that are part of the Japanese flower growers' heritage; the WCCA assembly centers, WRA Relocation and Isolation Centers, and other WRA facilities associated with the period of wartime internment, including camps at Tule Lake and Manzanar; and remnants of other smaller historic Japantowns identified by the statewide survey project, Preserving California's Japantowns. This is potentially the strongest proposal for a NHA because the high level of documentation of Japanese history throughout the state of California that exists and is still being produced.

### OPTION 5: NATIONWIDE SITES AS A NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

Similar to Option 4, a Nationwide Sites National Heritage Area would encompass all associated sites and areas within the nation, and would highlight many places outside of California that have been important parts of Japanese history. These places may include: the West Coast “exclusion zone” from which Japanese were displaced during World War II; the numerous WCCA assembly centers, WRA Relocation and Isolation Centers, and other WRA facilities associated with the period of wartime internment located throughout the Western U.S.; and places associated with the postwar diaspora of Japanese in the U.S., which are important to the ongoing history of Japanese Americans.

More detailed information on National Heritage Areas, process for nomination, and resulting benefits can be found in Appendix B.

#### Actions

- Seek advice from designated National Heritage Areas throughout the nation to learn from their efforts in order to develop a National Heritage Area.
- Determine eligibility of a National Heritage Area. Prepare preliminary documentation for review by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and determine which alternative(s) should be pursued.
- Obtain support from the Japantown community and officials and organizations at local, state and national levels for designation, and identify an effective “champion” for the designation who is willing to promote the cause to decision-makers and influential parties.
- Based upon advice and support of the SHPO, submit formal application and supporting documentation to the National Park Service for review.

### Encourage the Use of California Historic Building Code

Application of the California Historic Building Code (CHBC) allows owners of properties that are more than 50 years old (or that are designated historic properties) alternatives to the standard building code that allow for greater preservation of historic character. This allows older buildings to be improved in order to meet code requirements without dramatic changes that might otherwise be required. For example, properties can be granted allowances in regards to egress and accessibility requirements that make preserving historic entrances, stairways, and facades more feasible. Application of the CHBC can result in preservation of historic building materials rather than total replacement. Alternative means of meeting performance standards of the code can also save property owners from making expensive alterations. However the use of CHBC does not alleviate property owners from the requirements of the life safety code.

#### Actions

- Solicit assistance of the Chief Building Official to use the CHBC to review proposed improvements for qualifying properties in Japantown.
- Advise local property owners, business owners, contractors and architects to request use of the CHBC to develop proposed improvements for qualifying properties.

### Develop a Façade Easement Program

Property owners with historic properties who agree to maintain the property’s exterior appearance can be eligible for 10% tax federal income tax credit. Property owners agree to maintain a property’s exterior appearance by conveying an easement that covers the



The façade of this historic structure is preserved while allowing for new housing behind.

building’s façade in perpetuity to a non-profit preservation organization so the building’s historic features remain intact through the auspices of the preservation organization.

#### Actions

- Seek assistance from preservation organizations that implement local façade easement programs to understand program requirements and how they can relate to Japantown properties.
- Identify properties listed on or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as priority candidates for façade easements.
- Contact property owners and provide information on opportunities to obtain financial incentives through conveyance of façade easements.
- Solicit preservation organizations that would be in charge of implementing and managing the façade easement program.

### Develop a Japantown Community Land Trust

In addition to culturally and historically significant properties, the Japantown community has a wealth of culturally relevant non-profit institutions and organizations that are important in maintaining and continuing the community's cultural heritage. A Japantown Community Land Trust (JCLT) could be formed to purchase properties of historic/cultural significance that could then be leased to non-profit institutions and organizations at affordable rates. Businesses that agree to host non-profit groups or activities in their building during non-business hours could also potentially benefit from incentive programs through a JCLT program. Challenges to this strategy include the procuring of the initial capital needed to purchase buildings, the availability of buildings for purchase in Japantown, and the arrangement of sustainable leases that are beneficial to all parties.

#### Actions

- Determine the financial feasibility of investing in a land trust program for Japantown.
- Gather private investment interests to endow funds to implement a JCLT program.
- Form a new entity whose mission is to preserve properties of cultural, historic, artistic and or architectural merit, through the purchase of properties to place covenants and easements upon those properties and offer them for resale.



Source: NDD Creative

Building on the Japantown History Walk will help bring more recognition of Japantown's historic and cultural resources and strengthen the neighborhood character over time.

#### Update Land Use Controls to Secure Japantown's Future and Achieve Plan Goals

In order to retain Japantown's neighborhood-serving organizations and historic properties, the Plan recommends changing specific land use controls to be less restrictive toward desirable land uses and to facilitate reuse of historic properties. See Chapter 4: Land Use for more detail about these controls.

#### Build on Japantown's Unique Public Realm to Secure Japantown's Character

Improving the neighborhood's existing community heritage assets, including important public properties, and by providing better access to them within the public realm can help to retain and enhance Japantown's

cultural character. Promoting Japantown's plazas, libraries, community facilities, public art, and open spaces (including Buchanan Mall, Peace Plaza, and Western Addition Library described in Chapter 6: Public Realm) will help to maintain and enhance Japantown's cultural character by raising community awareness and interest. Specifically, improved wayfinding to the neighborhoods' many existing community resources, and improvements to the neighborhood's plazas and open spaces, so that they are more suitable for community events and activities, can enhance the experience of Japantown for the community as well as for visitors. Public realm improvements (detailed in Chapter 6) can also serve to reconnect the physical and social fabrics of the Japantown and Fillmore neighborhoods.





Wayfinding signs, like this one in Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, can help raise awareness of the numerous cultural resources in the neighborhood.



Rosa Parks Elementary School, located south of Geary, is a long-standing community resource that could better connected to the core of Japantown.

#### Actions

- Establish a community sub-committee of the Implementation Organization with assistance from professional experts (including public realm planners, public and cultural arts advocates, and landscape architects) to develop guidelines for public realm improvements (including materials, plantings, etc.).
- Using the guidelines established, engage a wayfinding consultant to work with the Implementation Organization to develop the wayfinding and signage program for Japantown.
- Using the guidelines established, ensure that community open spaces and pedestrian plazas are improved, especially as part of major development projects. Ensure that improvements to open spaces and pedestrian plazas preserve and enhance the community character, and meet the needs of the community for all neighborhood activities.
- Provide for the continued use of the public right of way for community events by streamlining procedures for obtaining necessary permits and authorizations in order to minimize the community's effort and cost.

#### *Consider Other Preservation Strategies Upon Further Study*

A number of preservation strategies relate to economic incentives that are available to owners of properties that are officially listed (or that are certified as eligible for official listing) in local, state, and/or federal registers of historic properties, as well as that meet other qualifying conditions. These economic incentives can facilitate preservation by making it financially advantageous for property owners to maintain, preserve, and restore their properties according to established guidelines for treating historic properties. The economic incentives, and the required conditions are listed in Appendix C: Historic Property Benefits Matrix.

RECOMMENDATIONS IN  
THIS CHAPTER:

## Community and Economic Development

- Establish an Organization to Oversee Implementation of the Better Neighborhood Plan
- Increase Business Retention Efforts to Address Ongoing Pressures on Existing Small Businesses
- Mitigate the Impact of Future Japan Center Construction
- Promote the District as a Regional Destination through Enhanced Marketing and Support for Community Events
- Recruit New, Culturally Appropriate Businesses to Fill Vacancies as They Arise and Achieve Desired Retail Mix
- Explore Strategies for Temporarily Relocating Japan Center Businesses During Renovation
- Provide Increased Maintenance, Beautification, and Security Services
- Improve Access to Space for Community Activities
- Retain the Japan Center's Character and its Roles as a Community Gathering Place, Showcase for Japanese American Culture, and Home for Culturally Appropriate Businesses
- Strengthen Community Organizations' Administrative Capacity