



JAPANTOWN TASK FORCE

日本町の経済発展・計画・保存

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PLANNING & PRESERVATION OF JAPANTOWN

NOTES FROM THE LAND USE/TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE JAPANTOWN TASK FORCE

1765 SUTTER STREET / ZOOMMEETING

THURSDAY, JULY 8, 2021

COMMITTEE MEMBER PRESENT:

Alice Kawahatsu*, Linda Walsh, Jeremy Chan*, Kenta Takamori*, Lori Yamauchi*, Paul Wermer, Rosalyn Tonai*, Karen Kai, Tomo Hirai

STAFF PRESENT:

Nina Bazan-Sakamoto, Susie Kagami

OTHERS PRESENT:

Emily Nichols, Thomas Liang, Steven Santa Maria*, Zoey Fan, Greg Vilorio

* Japantown Task Force Board Member

The meeting began at 6:00 p.m.

STAFF/COMMITTEE UPDATES:

CULTURAL DISTRICT / CHHESS

Nina submitted an edited version of the CHHESS to the City using the City's format and templates. They also met with Sheila Chung from MOHCD, who presented on the City's data on Japantown.

The Housing Element listening session has 11 confirmed invited participants for their session next week.

They have been working on branding prompts for the Cultural District as well as the Co-Creative Hub.

Linda Walsh mentioned that the recording of the Alaska Airlines Cultural District presentation (featuring 5 Cultural Districts including Japantown) is now online.

Lori said that there is a new reformatted and redesigned version that will soon be released to the public. Also, the CHHESS report will be up for adoption by the Board of Supervisors perhaps in the Fall, and it will be helpful to have community members make public comment in support of the CHHESS report.

Ros commented that it would be good to have a community vetting / final town hall to present the finalized CHHESS report before submitting it to the Board of Supervisors. Kenta noted that this should be discussed during the board meeting and asked if Alice could flag it for the Executive Committee Meeting.

Nina clarified that the report will be brought to the JTF board as well as the public before going to the board of supervisors.

JAPAN CENTER MALLS

Lori reported that she was elected Chair of the Japan Center Malls committee. At the last meeting, she presented on various land use issues. You can ask her or staff for a copy of the slides.

At the next meeting, updates will be presented by Grace Horikiri (Japantown Community Benefit District), Santino de Rose from Maven Properties (the leasing agent for 3D Investments), Kirsten Fletcher (Kinokuniya property manager).

Re: Yi Fang, the committee discussed that there was a need for a clearer process about new businesses entering Japantown; this discussion was further addressed during the JTF Board Meeting.

PEACE PLAZA

Since Rich Hashimoto wasn't able to attend, Kenta reported on behalf of Rich. The Committee is having trouble obtaining original drawings from the Plaza.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

1737 POST STREET, FORMULA RETAIL CUA - THOMAS LIANG, YI FANG FRUIT TEA

Karen summarized the previous discussion about Yi Fang. Many community members did not know about the proposal to bring Yi Fang into Japantown. The introduction of formula retail also risks driving out small businesses due to formula retail's greater resources. The LUT Committee has historically evaluated businesses that are coming before the Planning Commission. Two notable examples are Daiso and Quickly's. Daiso also arrived without much notice and was eventually approved, although it contributed to the closure of Japantown small business Ichibankan. Quickly's tried to enter under a different name to avoid being classified as formula retail.

JTF has implemented internal processes to better improve our internal communication.

JTF submitted a letter to the Planning Commission asking for extra time to consider the conditional use authorization. Glynis testified at the Planning Commission hearing presenting this position. The Planning Commission voted to approve Yi Fang pending discussion with the Japantown Task Force and community members. Glynis has had some 1:1 meetings with Thomas Liang from Yi Fang.

Thomas Liang and Zoey Fan from Yi Fang presented to the committee. He reported that they sent letters to community organizations, but it was right before shelter in place.

Yi Fang was started in honor of the founder's grandmother Yi Fang (nicknamed Yoshiko), who was born in 1920 in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period. They use high quality tea, organic milk, and fresh fruits, and do not use artificial syrups or powders.

They plan to contribute to the neighborhood through Japanese themed architecture, attracting foot traffic to the west mall to fill vacancies and support neighboring businesses, and prioritize hiring workers in the neighborhood.

They are customizing their internal wall decorations for Japantown, such as adding “Japantown” to the signage and translating the Yi Fang story into Japanese.

They identified themselves as “small business franchise owners” as opposed to directly formula retail. They submitted the application 17 months ago and have been paying rent since October 1, 2020 (9 months).

Ros asked when Yi Fang’s proposal to 3D Investments was submitted, and if 3D Investments made introductions to any other businesses. Thomas said he was introduced to the Japantown Merchants Association and not any other organizations.

Karen asked if Thomas received any guidance from the Japantown Merchants Association, such as being introduced to the other merchants. Karen said that it’s important for us to work together if we are going to succeed as a community. Thomas reported that they gave a presentation to the Japantown Merchants Association board.

Alice asked if Yi Fang was aware of local Japantown festivals and if they have plans to support them. Thomas said that he would be interested in getting connected with local festivals.

Alice asked how Yi Fang will handle the increased garbage. Thomas reported that he spoke with Sheron Chu from 3D Investments about how to address this, including washing cups. Karen asked for clarification on this procedure. Because the tea contains fruit in it, Sheron asked Yi Fang to separate food from the cups so that they go into separate bins. Karen suggested that Yi Fang get in touch with the other restaurateurs and cafes in Japan Center Mall, because she did not believe they were required to do this. She said that it’s good for the business owners to communicate with each other and respond similarly to 3D.

Lori asked whether Yi Fang received support from corporate with paying rent? Thomas said that because they were not an operating business yet, they did not receive any support from the corporate Yi Fang.

Jeremy asked and Thomas said he would appreciate being introduced to festival leaders to discuss how Yi Fang can support local events.

Ros asked why Yi Fang was paying rent when they were not operating. Thomas said that based on the news, he was aware that Japantown had strict landlords that did not give rent rebates, so he never asked 3D Investments for a rent reduction. Ros expressed regret that because the community was not informed, they could not assist with rent reduction.

Linda asked and Thomas reported that the bamboo straw is compostable.

Jeremy asked Thomas to talk more about his motivation to becoming a franchise owner and why he wanted to start in Japantown. Thomas said that he was drawn to Yi Fang compared to other boba shops because they focus on healthy drinks without powders. He also said he has hung out in Japantown since he was young and liked the idea of starting a business there.

Paul asked for clarification as to why paper cups with organic matter cannot be placed in compost bins. Thomas clarified that this was a plastic cup issue and not a paper cup issue. Paul urged Yi Fang to not use plastic cups due to the environmental impact, and that it’s inconsistent with Yi Fang’s healthy branding. Thomas said that he will be providing customers a choice to use paper

/ plastic cups, but due to corporate, he is not allowed to refuse providing plastic cups. He will try to discuss this more with corporate.

Alice asked if Thomas has any other business experience. He owns a small restaurant in San Mateo that he sold right before Covid.

Glynis requested (via Kenta) for Yi Fang to try to do their best to collaborate with neighboring businesses, particularly Cafe Hana, who's business viability is legitimately threatened by Yi Fang entering the mall.

Kenta gave concluding remarks, explaining that people care very deeply for Japantown and invited Thomas to join in taking care of the neighborhood together.

Paul echoed earlier comments on the negative impact of formula retail, and that franchise owners can still perpetuate the negative impact of formula retail. Formula retail can lead to rising rent values that push out small businesses. He also noted that JTF likely received notices that were not passed on to the committee and urged the JTF board to fix the problem. Kenta reported that Steve Nakajo has publicly taken responsibility for the lack of communication, but Kenta did not know

Karen noted that the merchants are not properly represented and do not have a meaningful voice within JTF or its committees.

Rosalyn said that it's important for JTF staff to be transparent and share information with the board. Also, 3D Investments has an obligation to communicate with the community as part of the covenants. She also expressed her concern about viewpoints regarding "not making waves" during upcoming meetings with 3D Investments.

Jeremy reported that JTF staff Brandon Quan has created a folder to include any public notices emailed to the info@japantowntaskforce.org email address. Karen noted that the Executive Director and staff should be highlighting specific notices for the committee's attention, and they should be aware of broader Japantown issues instead of passing the buck. Kenta noted that this is an important issue that should be reflected in performance reviews, and as board members we should reflect on how to hold staff accountable for what happened. Jeremy said that it would be helpful for staff to flag/highlight certain notices for approval but that also it is helpful for all documents to be uploaded and shared with the committee.

Paul clarified that under Bob Hamaguchi, all notices were sent to the committee and then the committee decided which were important. He expressed concern about any sort of policy in which staff made decisions about which notices go to committee. Tomo commented that the planning documents can be quite jargon-y and that she is not sure if staff has the expertise to review these documents.

Karen clarified that providing more information to the committee is good, but that there are certain red flags like conditional use for formula retail that staff should be able to recognize. Karen also commented that the head of the Japantown Merchants Association (Richard Hashimoto) who sits on the JTF board was aware of this but did not inform the rest of the board nor follow up with Thomas. Karen commented that JTF has been taking the position of avoiding offending 3D as opposed to advocating on behalf of retail.

Lori commented that because she is chairing the next Mall committee meeting, she asked if LUT

would like this issue to be raised with Santino DeRose.

Greg Vilorio reported that he, Grace Horikiri, Rich Hashimoto, Steve Nakajo had a meeting regarding this. Prior to this, JTF used to have a better relationship with the Planning Commission and thus received more advance notice on these issues.

Kenta pledged to the committee that when giving the LUT report to the board, he will report on the committee's concerns.

Ros suggested that we should suggest and codify a procedure.

PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

Alice reported that she has been working with DPW and Supervisor Preston's office on dangerous sidewalks. DPW has said they will work on this issue at the end of July. So far, they have filled the sections with tar to make them less dangerous, and have also marked up the pavement.

Linda has been working with Vision Zero to collect data on traffic speed around Japantown. They are looking at Thursday July 15 or Monday July 19. Linda Walsh asked the committee if they had any suggestions for specific intersections. Right now they are looking at Post/Octavia, Geary/Laguna, Geary/Webster, and Post/Buchanan.

CD COMMUNITY LAND PLANNING

The working group for the Preservation and Development Vision Master Plan will be meeting on Tuesday, July 13, from 6pm-7pm. Please ask Lori if you would like to join the working group.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Linda acknowledged Susie Kagami's representation of Japantown in SFNext's Cultural District Panel. Full Recording link: <https://youtu.be/VOfl9BZdcSk>

Highlights Reel link:
https://youtu.be/-DAX_1lLmc4

Paul noted that Jason Wright is being nominated for the Preservation Committee and asked individuals to support him. Paul vouched for him as a thoughtful competent individual who has done a lot of work in the Presidio, and he predicted that he would be a supporter of Japantown. See Rules Committee Agenda: Paul noted that Jason Wright is being nominated for the Preservation Committee and asked individuals to support him. See Rules Committee agenda: https://sfbos.org/sites/default/files/rls071221_agenda.pdf

Kenta welcomed Steven Santa Maria, the newest JTF board member, who introduced himself. He has been involved in the JA community starting from the Japanese American Student Society (JASS) at UC Davis) and currently serves as the co-chair for Nakayoshi. He along with Graig Inaba runs the small business Kenshin Sake, an online sake retailer.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Alice announced that the Nihonmachi Street Fair is hosting several pop-up events. On Saturday July 17, they will be having a series of performances; on Saturday July 31 “Aloha by the Bay” featuring Hawaiian cultural performances; on Saturday-Sunday August 7-8, a resource fair.

Ros announced that NJAHS and the Military Intelligence Service Historic Learning Center (Building 640) are officially open. They have one Nikkei Community Internship (NCI) intern - Hailey Tokushige as well as several high school interns. The interns organized a “Welcome Wishes” event for Tanabata.

Kenta expressed his thanks and appreciation to staff for their hard work.

The meeting adjourned at 7:47 p.m.

The next meeting will be at 6:00 p.m., August 12, 2021 online via Zoom.