San Francisco Japantown Planning
Community Meeting
September 10, 2011

Summary of Proceedings and Comments

I. Introduction (Bob Hamaguchi) (10:00 a.m.)

Planning process doesn't end with this fourth and last community meeting. This meeting looks forward to the October 27 Planning Commission meeting at which the community will present the status of its recommendations.

Circular seating reflects that we are preparing a community-based plan. For the past 18 monts we have focused on articulating "what" the community wants in the plan in order to preserve the community. "How" that is done will come later.

We approach the issues in light of what's good for the community. We look to compromise for the community good.

We realize change will happen. The Plan will manage that change in the community's interest, while encouraging economic development, cultural preservation.

Summary: the 2009 Draft Plan emphasized capital development that threatened Japantown. New perspective based on ensuring the sustainability of the community and community participation in the decisions.

II. Phase 1: Cultural Heritage, Public Realm, Transportation, Built Form

A. Cultural Heritage (Ken Kaji)

"How" we achieve planning goals is interconnected with both "what" and "why" we want.

Recommendation 1: Social Heritage District, a special district designed to preserve community culture. Has been in works since 2009, but still a WIP. Majory components: (a) incorporate controls in "interim SUD" which will be incorporated in final Special Use District. (b) CBO to be established to implement protections. (c) develop tangible and intangible cultural resource inventory. (d) boundaries of existing SUD to be extended to include additional resources outside of existing SUD boundaries. (e) fees for development that adversely affects community cultural heritage.

Recommendation 2: Landmarking of key community properties, e.g., Peace Pagoda, NLF former Japanese YWCA building, and other properties. Implementing committee will work with property owners to aid the landmarking process.

Recommendation 3: _____ (missed it)

Recommendation 4: Encourage the Japanese Consul to move its offices, or at least some part of its operations, back to Japantown.

B. Public Realm (Diane Onizuka)

Public Realm defined as government owned or controlled space: e.g., parks, sidewalks

Recommendation 1: Develop greening of Japantown wherever possible despite economic constraints and limits on major development. Community feedback at public meetings has supported greening recommendation. Need professional design incorporating culturally relevant and climatically appropriate landscaping.

Recommendation 2: Removal of Webster Street Linear Park, originally recommended in 2009 Draft Plan. Various reasons: climate, safety, topography, cost. Looking for alternatives.

C. Transportation (Paul Wermer)

Japantown presents interesting challenges because it is both a local community and a regional resource accessed principally by car. Focus has been on (a) safer crossings at key intersections; (b) managing and controlling traffic; (c) how to manage parking to meet needs of different constituencies and interests.

Recommendation 1: improve crossings especially for seniors on Geary and Webster streets. On Geary, bridges are not working; need grade level crossings

Recommendation 2: Transit access and efficiency: how make transit more useful. Need to engage MTA, CTA and BRT Geary. MUNI not good access for other than commute purposes. Difficult for families, seniors.

Recommendation 3: Parking: recommend 1:1 ratio. BRT rejected underground parking in connection with replacement of Geary underpass.

Recommendation 4: Eliminate Geary barrier. Slow traffic down.

Recommendation 5: Study effects of construction along Geary corridor

Recommendation 6: Comments from community meetings: (a) put Geary underground between Laguna and Steiner, and construct park on top. (b) cable car extension to Japantown.

D. Built Form (Karen Kai)

2009 Draft Plan based on healthy economy and development driven. Economy has changed preventing large expansion. But community also realized that the development proposals in the 2009 DP would destroy existing vibrant community. New recommendations seek to preserve and promote vibrant Japantown.

Japantown built form encompasses a broad range of existing forms and styles, in different areas of the plan area, and is not easily defined. E.g., Victorians, "Japanese" styles.

Conclusion of community input process: large development not conducive to cultural preservation and restoration.

Recommendation 1: Keep height limits at existing levels. Planning Dept. study shows enough expansion potential for next 20+ years.

Recommendation 2: Set backs at 3rd story (35 feet) along Post and Buchanan so as to avoid "canyon" effect.

Recommendation 3: Design guidelines tailored for Japantown are being drafted, but will incorporate options for the different styles, sizes of building forms historically present in Japantown.

Recommendation 4: Under consideration, particularly for Japantown's core commercial area, is the elimination of a strict Density Rule, to be replaced by a combination of controls that would limit actual density but allow more flexibility in design in order to achieve goals of providing housing for various constituencies (e.g., elderly, young adults, families. This is slated for further discussion among the planning committees.

Recommendation 5: Also under consideration are what parking controls and requirements will be applied to the commercial and residential Japantown areas.

E. Public Discussion and Questions

1. Ben Pease: commends community process that furthered good ideas and jettisoned bad ones for Japantown

2. Donna Graves (introduced by Bob Hamaguchi): echoed Ben Pease's comments.

3. What alternatives are being considered to Webster Street linear park?
– Diane Onizuka: Other parcels, e.g., parking lot off of Webster, but need to contact owners.
– Glynis Nakahara: it is vital to determine what people want when they say they want parks (e.g., space for reflection; space for kids to play; sports?)

4. What didn't work about the proposed Webster Street linear park?

– Diane Onizuka: narrow; driveways; steep hill; wind; refuse area; proposed cost ($6.7 million); lack of money

– Paul Wermer: Also would have significant traffic impact

– Karen Kai: linear park promoted as offer to youth, but didn't address their needs upon analysis. Also, was "eye candy" to encourage development, and would require EIR. For the proposed $7 million cost, can do much more for youth: e.g., could buy a building and refurbish it. Planning committees hope we can work with youth to find or identify resources that will work for their needs.

5. Melody Takata: Proposes consideration of closing Post Street at Buchanan, and connecting Peace Plaza with Buchanan Mall. Proposes extending cable car from downtown to Japantown along Sutter. Landscape with cherry trees.

– Ken Kaji: entrance to Japan Center parking lot on Post affects traffic flows along Post and Webster

– Greg Johnson: Running streetcars would trigger EIR under CEQA. Generally keep in mind the bureaucracy.

6. Series of written comments (Bob Hamaguchi)

a. Suggest cook-off contest to bring people to Japantown
b. "Allow" more Korean businesses
c. For built form consideration, tie Victorian heritage to 21st Century

7. Should Japantown tie into Hamilton Park?

– Bob Hamaguchi: Yes, under consideration)

8. Will Japanese gardens be required under Design Guidelines?

– Karen Kai: No. In commercial core, Japanese elements will be recommended and supported, but not required.

9. Will limiting height to 50 feet realistically allow for growth?

– Bob Hamaguchi: Planning Dept. study says yes, but should be considered further.

10. Is increase in heights to 55 feet under consideration?

– Karen Kai: Yes, increase to 55 feet along Post and Buchanan will be recommended to promote active retail ground floor use with 15 foot ceilings, which is San Francisco standard now.

11. CPMC already uses considerable parking resources, and Van Ness development will use more. What is impact and what is being done?

– Bob Hamaguchi: Needs to be studied further. Planning committee did formally respond to CPMC Draft EIR raising parking issues.

12. Mary Ishisaki: As owner of property on Buchanan Mall, concerned that planning be realistic about economic growth potential. (See no. 9, above.) Also, CPMC made presentation to Kimochi, but we need to be realistic about increased demands for parking.

– _____: Agrees. Also, notes potential for economic stimulus for new CPMC campus on Van Ness.

13: Tobin Fuji: What is status of BRT proposals?

– Diane Onizuka: Unclear. Japantown has CAC rep, but not active. From Planning perspective, we have asked for widening of sidewalk, but don't know whether will be accepted in what appears to be center-running plan.

– Paul Wermer: Van Ness BRT planning running significantly behind schedule. EIR not released apparently because of unfavorable comments from agencies.

14. Sudo (?): there are business success stories in Japantown using Mayor's office money: E.g., Sophie's Crepes. Also, proposes ramen specialty restaurant/museum.

15. Lila Ader (?): NLF parent; in Japantown a lot. Proposes Peace Plaza redesign and development.

16. Tobin Fuji: Rec and Park fees too high for use of Peace Plaza by community.

III. BREAK: 11:08 – 11:19 a.m.

IV. Phase 2: Land Use, Economic Development, Community Land Trust, Japan Center

A. Land Use (Glynis Nakahara)

What should we use land and buildings for in order to preserve and promote Japantown? We have five major recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Existing Zones 2 and 3 combined into single special Neighborhood Commercial District (NCD) for Japantown. Will focus on commercial core, but exclude Fillmore Street, which as its own controls.

Recommendation 2: Zone 1, essentially residential area north of Sutter, will be retained but will protect community and cultural uses

Recommendation 3: Respond to expressed community desire for affordable housing for families and other constituencies.

Recommendation 4: Activate ground floor uses in commercial core, with protection of Japanese/Japanese American culturally relevant activities.

Recommendation 5: Update zoning to protect livability of alleyways in planning area

B. Economic Development (Bob Hamaguchi, Hiroshi Fukuda)

Bob Hamaguchi
Recommendation 1: Create community-based organization to implement plan

Recommendation 2: Protect existing businesses

Recommendation 3: Promote culturally relevant businesses, including Japanese/Japanese American.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen and coordinate nonprofit organization work in Japantown.

Recommendation 6: Other proposals: (a) gain access to city charges whose revenues are used outside of Japantown. (b) develop retention strategy for family/heritage businesses important to the community; (c) need to stay on top of impact of CPMC Van Ness development on community.

Hiroshi Fukuda

Recommendation: Revise community implementing organization composition to be representative and effective.

Recommendation 2: Increase effective marketing of Japantown to tourists. Note: Japanese tourists don't want to come to Japantown; looking for something different than home; Japantown gets European, etc. visitors

Recommendation 3: Need to recruit and promote Japanese businesses. Public comment disfavored complete bar on formula retail so as to allow some Japanese retailer stores under a CU process.

Recommendation 4: Serve Japanese nationals (shin Issei and shin Nisei) who live in area

Recommendation 5: Encourage Consul General to relocate at least some of its operation in Japantown.

Recommendation 6: Encourage and support Japantown newspapers.

C. Community Land Trust (Bob Hamaguchi)

Nonprofit organization to buy property for preservation purposes. Could include historic buildings, Japan Center malls. Innovative idea, especially as to the Japan Center, which would be commercial not residential operation. Only one method of securing community assets, but one that has promise.

Two studies: (1) Burlington Associates – studied purpose and structure of CLT; (2) Seifel study of financial feasibility of Japan Center upgrade without closing garage.

Major issues: (1) Whether can proceed as a tax-exempt nonprofit so as to be eligible for large donations; (2) capital development

D. Japan Center (Hiroshi Fukuda)

2009 Draft Plan was a development plan, massively replace existing buildings and close garage for 2+ years; with resulting loss of community businesses.

Recommendations: (2) City participate in any proposed changes to Japan Center; (2) Integrate malls with Peace Plaza, as community gathering place; (3) Integrate Japanese design aesthetics; (4) temporary relocation of businesses during construction.

Changes: (1) Maintain existing height and density; (2) renovation without closing garage; (3) City money to analyze structural integrity of garage; (4) Analysis of probable effects of construction and how to mitigate.

E. Questions and Comments

1. Roof of Japan Center as green space?
– Hiroshi Fukuda: Miyako (East) Mall can support two more floors for residences
– Paul Lord: Planning Dept. is studying uses of Japan Center for environmentally sound and sustainable greening purposes (e.g., growth and use of soy). Will present proposal to merchants at end of the year. Will also consider whether open space can be integrated.
– Sudo: his class developed ideas for malls; ideas available on line

2. Donna Graves: appreciates creative approach to uses. Stresses importance of preserving authentic, robust community. Keep the best of what is left.

3. Ben Pease: Sees San Jose Japantown as model Vibrant community, not developed and community has good working relationships. Suggests encouraging cooperative relationships between otherwise separate community organizations: e.g., JCCCNC, NLF and Kimon organizations whose buildings are adjacent.

4. Rose Hillson: Density rule is being proposed to be eliminated from NCD . Need feedback.

5. Melody Takata: Need an interactive space (Miyako Mall?) for multi uses: e.g., gift store, coffee area, historical presentatiosn, 500 seat theatre. Frustrated with Kabuki Theatre (Sundance) because inaccessible to community organizations because of cost. Wants community to come back to leave here.

6. Kazumi: (Stand up comedian, Japanese national): Japantown needs performance and gathering spaces

7. _____: On development issue, references JANM in Los Angeles's Little Tokyo being a large draw. Suggests consideration of artistic lofts, high quality restaurants. Need active streetfronts.

8. Hiroshi Sugaya: Consider mid-block parking lots [NPC lots] are a major underutilized resource. Street level open parking not best use of space. Could be site of a multi-use facility.

V. Wrapup-Conclusion (Karen Kai) (12:12 p.m.)

Very good discussion. This is not the end of the process or of community involvement. Comments and ideas are appreciated. Recommendations will be reviewed again in light of comments. Planning Dept will draft a new plan for Japantown, which will come back to the community for further review, before being submitted to the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors for approval and adoption. Asks community to stay involved.