



March 28, 2017

Mayor and Council
City of Vancouver

Re: Building Community Society (BCS) comments on proposed changes to the Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan

The Building Community Society (BCS) thanks Council for giving the public the opportunity to comment on the proposed changes to the Plan and in particular to the Economic Revitalization Strategy. BCS recently convened a workshop to learn the details of the proposed changes and to hear community stakeholder concerns regarding the future of Chinatown. We thank City Staff for providing a clear explanation of proposed changes and the many community stakeholder groups for sharing their concerns.

Overall, BCS is encouraged by and supportive of the proposed changes to the Chinatown zoning by-law regulations – specifically the changes to the existing HA-1 and HA-1A zones. We believe the proposed changes are a marked improvement over the present regulations and should help to protect the heritage, culture and traditional building character of Chinatown, particularly along the critical Pender Street corridor.

BCS also acknowledges and welcomes progress on the other measures to enhance heritage, cultural, affordable housing, new housing and public realm improvements.

The main issue is the zoning policy for the Chinatown South area. BCS is sympathetic to stakeholder concerns that the proposed zoning by-law changes would result in an increased number of larger mass buildings which would be detrimental to the traditional building character of Chinatown. In particular, the concerns are about the prospect of more buildings with frontages of 200 feet and maximum heights of up to 120 or 150 feet.

There are two competing objectives in play. One is to maintain the traditional building character of Chinatown. The other is to increase the residential base in order to enhance the viability of local area businesses and to increase the supply of social/seniors/affordable housing. If it is felt that both objectives have equal merit, the challenge is to find a workable balance between them.

BCS believes it is necessary to strike a balance between these two objectives. In order to achieve a revitalized local business climate, both increased density and traditional building character, as well as diversity of urban form/fabric must be accommodated. The City has recognized this and staff has brought forward useful zoning policy changes and regulations to address these conflicts. The problem is that crafting zoning schedules to fully achieve this is more than challenging.

Nonetheless, with this aim in mind, BCS offers the following comments on proposed zoning policies and regulations.

BCS does not support the proposed Inclusionary Zoning provision for the HA-1B zone and the northern half of the HA-1C zone east of Main Street and accompanying regulations which would permit buildings with a maximum height of 120 feet and a maximum frontage of 200 feet. While such developments could provide some form of public benefit, meets community objectives of innovative heritage restoration, provides social/seniors/affordable housing and create variety of scale, it is still an issue whether or not such larger scale buildings directly adjacent to or in very close proximity to the historic and commercially active areas of Chinatown would detract from its traditional character. So long as there are other site opportunities for buildings providing the aforementioned benefits, the appropriate action at this point would be not to allow them in the subject areas. It is noted that the proposal is to allow only one density and height bonusing per block in these zones. But once a precedent has been set, it may be difficult to deny other applications.

The Vancouver Chinatown Foundation (VCF) is a group dedicated to revitalizing Chinatown heritage and culture by attracting more people of Chinese descent to visit Chinatown more often to eat, socialize and participate in other activities. They feel that large scale mixed use buildings and accompanying gentrification detracts from the historic culture and vitality of the area and will discourage this target group from coming. They reference a May 2014 US publication, Older, Smaller, Better – Measuring how the character of buildings and blocks influences urban vitality, by the Preservation Green Lab, a department of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This publication argues for the preservation of older, smaller buildings and touts the economic benefits of retaining narrow lot developments. The VCF believes that successful achievement of this development pattern would, along with the continuing growth of youth involvement, do much to enhance the cultural resurgence of Chinatown.

This is an interesting idea, so the City should pursue the possibility of providing bonuses for 25 foot lot developments. This might result in the creation of some very unexpected unique one-off buildings that will add diversity to the urban fabric of Chinatown.

BCS supports the proposed Inclusionary Zoning provision and accompanying regulations for the HA-1C zone (except for the northern half of the area east of Main St.) and the HA-1D zone. This will help achieve the objective of increasing the resident population base in Chinatown. However, BCS suggests the City investigate alternate building forms/designs and strategic placing of buildings in these zones as a way to mitigate the overall design impact of larger scale buildings on Chinatown. BCS is mindful of the argument that a 200 ft. frontage building with stepping back of mid and upper floors would create a saw tooth pattern that allows for more air/light space at these elevations. BCS is also aware that the side by side juxtaposition of several tall narrow buildings in a block may not be ideal either.

If the proposal to allow larger buildings in these two Inclusionary Zones will in fact result in substantially more social/senior/affordable housing, then the proposed amendment to increase the maximum allowable frontage seems a reasonable trade-off.

BCS supports the retention of the existing HA-1A zone for the sub-area in the southeast corner of Hastings and Pender Street and the creation of the proposed HA-1B, HA-1C and HA-1D zones and their accompanying regulations. These regulations are more favourable for Chinatown

when compared to existing HA-1A regulations as they limit permitted frontages and retain the current maximum height of 90 feet.

A relaxation of up to 1.85 FSR for laneway retail and commercial mezzanine could be problematic because of the need for emergency vehicular access and the requirement for an address. However, getting an address may not be an issue if the lane is directly connected to a street.

BCS is unsure if enough staff resources have been directed to the building mass/design issue. If not, BCS strongly urges Council to allocate more budget and staff time to deal with massing/design because this constantly arises as the most pressing issue amongst most Chinatown stakeholders.

With respect to heritage and culture, it is essential that heritage buildings such as the Family Association buildings be saved and upgraded. BCS notes that initiatives like the Chinese Society Legacy Program has made progress in funding upgrades and would strongly encourage the City to continue to explore partnerships and other avenues to further this objective.

The Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden, the Chinese Cultural Centre and the Chinese Military Museum are important features for attracting visitors to Chinatown and for maintaining the culture and history of the area. To this end, these organizations and business groups should be encouraged to continue or to step up their efforts and work collaboratively to attract visitors/users, which could lead to increased private/public investment in these facilities.

While much progress has been made in terms of providing and improving the public realm, there does not appear to be much attention given to street safety and security. Addressing this issue would go a long way toward making Chinatown more attractive for residents and visitors alike, especially during evening hours. This would be one of the prerequisites for the achievement of the Vancouver Chinatown Foundation ambition noted earlier.

In summary, BCS recommends that consideration be given to our proposal to scrap the inclusionary zoning provision for the HA-1B zone and the northern half of the HA-1C zone east of Main Street, at least for the near to mid term future. In the longer term, it may be appropriate to revisit this policy depending on such factors as city wide needs for social, seniors and affordable housing. BCS supports all the other proposed zoning policies and accompanying regulations.

The above comments are aimed at preserving the good and fostering the better. If we want to aim for the best, we need to ask what will/should/can the future of Chinatown be. The answers to this question may help determine the most appropriate zoning policies and regulations for Chinatown going forward.



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