

**Minutes of the Chinatown Working Group (CWG)**  
**10am to 12pm, October 3, 2008**  
**Confucius Plaza Community Room**

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Attendees:

ORGANIZATIONS (Representatives): Asian American Arts Center (Robert Lee); Asian American/Asian Research Institute-CUNY (Betty Lee Sung, Joyce Moy); Asian Americans For Equality (Richard Lee); Bowery Alliance of Neighbors (Michael Campo, Mitchell Gruber); CAAAV/Chinatown Tenants Union; CCBA (Justin Yu, Wee K. Wong); Chinatown Partnership (Wellington Chen); Chinese Chamber of Commerce (David Louie); Chinatown Manpower Project (Pearl Chin, Stephanie Lau); Confucius Plaza (Drew Moschella); CREATE in Chinatown (Amy Chin); Municipal Art Society (Eve Baron); Two Bridges (Victor Papa); Margaret Chin; Democratic Nominee for State Senate Daniel Squadron

PUBLIC OFFICIALS (Representatives): Mayor Bloomberg (Lolita Jackson, Pauline Yu); Assembly Speaker Silver (Michael Chan, Karen He); Council Speaker Quinn (Jasper Li); City Comptroller Thompson (Sandra Ung); MBP Stringer (Jen Hong, Greg Kirschenbaum); Councilmember Gerson (Tammy To)

COMMUNITY BOARD (Representatives): CB#1 (Michael Levine); CB#2 (Ed Ma, James Solomon); CB#3 (Dominic Pisciotta, Susan Stetzer, Pearl Chin); CB#10 (Beatrice Sibblies)

MEDIA (Representatives): *Sing Tao Daily* (Jacky Wong)

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## **I Welcome and Introductions**

Chairperson James Solomon welcomed the group and reported that he has continued to meet individually with a cross section of Chinatown community leaders to discuss their concerns and ideas. He invited CWG members to suggest other community leaders with whom he should meet.

James stressed the importance of formulating CWG's organizational objectives, goals and structure. To help guide the discussion, guest speakers were invited to address the CWG.

## **II Guest Speakers**

### **Eve Baron, PhD, Director of the Planning Center at the Municipal Art Society (MAS)\***

Ms. Baron presented a general map of greater Chinatown illustrating some current land use characteristics. MAS is a membership organization committed to advancing intelligent planning and design in New York City. They help local communities address planning challenges, build capacity and document neighborhood efforts. In working with communities, they emphasize the importance of 'local knowledge' since local people are the neighborhood's 'experts'.

MAS can be a useful resource for CWG. MAS is equipped to provide data tracking, technical assistance, and other tools for neighborhood planning initiatives.

Since numerous plans and studies have already been produced on Chinatown in recent years, a good starting point for CWG would be to assemble, digest, and summarize them and use that as a springboard for a new planning effort.

Another critical step is determining boundaries of the area CWG wants to work on. Neighborhood boundaries are porous and shifting so CWG should seriously grapple with defining boundaries. New York City's Department of City Planning maintains a map of neighborhood boundaries, but the City's definition is not necessarily the same as the community's. Community Boards are another set of boundaries as are

Council Districts. There are many boundary overlays and CWG must decide which ones make the most sense for its planning effort. Ms. Baron introduced a “Chinatown Base Map”, which included Zoning Designations as well as the boundaries used in prior.

Ms. Baron began to outline a basic 10-step ‘road map’ for moving forward concretely on a planning process while still reaching out as widely as possible to the community.

Ms. Baron emphasized the importance of building consensus in a community planning process. While time consuming, it is necessary for moving the process and the community forward. CWG should begin by deepening the relationships with existing partners.

**ACTION:** As an initial step, participating CWG members are asked to post links to each other’s websites

**Joyce Moy, Executive Director of the Asian American/Asian Research Institute (AAARI) at City University of New York (CUNY):**

AAARI can assist CWG’s effort by compiling all the past research and conduct a gap analysis. By mapping out on a matrix and perhaps drilling down to see which issues have been or have not been looked at in previous studies, AAARI can ascertain whether it is imperative to address the gaps by conducting supplemental studies or simply by updating some critical data. One key objective should be to make sure that as many voices as possible are included in those studies and to identify any segments of the community that may have been missed or underrepresented.

Further study will be needed to discern between myth and reality. (e.g. are co-ops and condos overrunning C-town? Are working class immigrants being driven from the neighborhood?) All assumptions and allegations should be compared with actual empirical data.

The initial research work needed to develop a full proposal for a sustained planning effort will require initial seed funding of at least \$5,000-15,000. Ms. Moy will confer with the AAARI board of directors and graduate school members to gain focus, support and consensus. Ms. Moy further committed to assist CWG with fundraising efforts and has identified some possible funding prospects already.

**Beatrice Sibblies, Chair of Economic Development Committee for Community Board 10 in Harlem \*\***

Ms. Sibblies presented an overview of the 125<sup>th</sup> Street rezoning plan that CB10 had recently been involved in.

Ms. Sibblies commended CWG for reaching out to learn about rezoning and planning processes in other neighborhoods. She emphasized the importance of engaging the community in broadbased discussions. Ms. Sibblies warned, “Rezoning is a very blunt instrument/tool that can help you or destroy you” and the resulting rezoning plan may not be consistent with the initial expressed priorities (i.e. there are likely to be unintended consequences).

In the case of Harlem’s 125<sup>th</sup> Street corridor, the rezoning was spurred on by the idea that it was underdeveloped. The wide commercial street was dominated by single story buildings housing stores that sold a limited variety of goods. After business hours, the street was devoid of pedestrian traffic, dimly lit, lined by darkened storefronts barricaded by ominous pull-down metal security gates, and thus deserted and dangerous.

The community’s priorities for 125<sup>th</sup> Street were to:

1. Enliven the street at night
2. Bring in a mixed income community and add residential users
3. Attract more cultural users

To achieve the goal of enlivening the street and making space for a greater diversity of business and residential spaces, the rezoning plan doubled the (FAR) density of 125<sup>th</sup> St and increased building height limits. This angered the community because the unintended consequence was to effectively alter the original ‘open sky’ feel of the street.

To ensure a mixed income community, the rezoning included an 80/20 incentive allowing developers to build taller buildings if 20% of the units are set aside for affordable housing. But, the 20% set aside was designated for families earning \$56K/year. Meanwhile the average Harlem resident only earned \$26K/year. The unintended consequence was to effectively exclude the average Harlem resident.

To ensure greater cultural presence and use, the plan introduced the City’s first ‘Arts Bonus’ which is a developer incentive to include cultural spaces within new developments. However, the indigenous Harlem-based arts organizations are not well-capitalized. Therefore, the unintended consequence was that the cultural spaces attracted more arts entities from outside the community rather than the local artists and arts groups who found the spaces to be beyond their economic reach.

The Environmental Impact Study (EIS) conducted by the City deemed the businesses and employees displaced as a result of the rezoning were not materially important to the City’s economy. The unintended consequence was that the City would not be obligated to help relocate the businesses or compensate them for losses when the one-story buildings they occupied were demolished for large scale development.

Due to these and other factors, the draft rezoning plan ignited fierce community outrage. The Department of City Planning was surprised by the reaction to its two year planning effort. They felt that they were addressing the community priorities, but the community saw a plan that did not serve them. Residents viewed 125<sup>th</sup> Street as their main commercial corridor and the rezoning would bring luxury housing to the street, effectively changing and destroying it. Residents decried the destruction of the low rise buildings and ‘village’ character, charging that it would transform 125<sup>th</sup> Street to a luxury condo corridor resembling 86<sup>th</sup> St and displace existing residents and businesses.

After much community debate and negotiations on multiple levels with different city agencies and elected officials, they were able to alter the rezoning plan and include provisions to address community’s concerns. This required unprecedented cooperation between the three Community Boards and resulted in:

1. Deeper provisions for affordable housing
2. Equal density increase for commercial and residential spaces
3. Provisions to protect existing local businesses
4. More funding from the Department of Cultural Affairs to local arts groups so they could use the new cultural spaces.
5. Reduction of the height cap from 290 feet to 190 feet
6. Establishment of a committee to monitor the follow up and progress of the rezoning

Ms. Sibblies offered several words of advice to CWG based on her experience:

- Be sure to have someone in the group who understands zoning and who can explain it to everyone else in layman’s terms.
- The re-zoning timeline is unforgiving so make sure you allot enough time and can extend the timeline as needed.
- Getting community input and response is very time consuming but very necessary.
- Be very inclusive throughout the process to avoid a situation like CB10’s where people are asked to vote on a plan that they had no hand in shaping.
- Fully vet your plan through community-wide meetings, every subcommittee of every community board, before bringing it to a vote.

- Document all outreach efforts, community reactions, processes, dialogues, etc. to show the breadth of the civic response and involvement.
- Be cognizant of what is achievable through zoning and what may be better realized through other mechanisms because, again, zoning is a ‘blunt instrument’ (ex. getting funds for affordable housing is better achieved through HPD and the city budgeting process rather than through zoning).
- Understand your points of leverage is and use them (ex. a council person got millions of dollars for renovating a park in Harlem during the rezoning process. Be aware that if you are giving increased development density, it is a good time to pursue and get other community concessions through the standard city budgeting process before the zoning is finalized.)

### III Group Discussion

- Bilingual translation at public meetings, forums, etc. should be a fundamental component of any Chinatown planning process.
- Planning should not simply take the form of maps and studies, but also grass-roots, street level engagement
- CWG should consider a target 3-6 month goal (i.e. what will CWG produce and bring back to the community).
- Forming the open and comprehensive community process and implementing it would be a feat in and of itself.
- Any new process must avoid the fractiousness and accusations of exclusion experienced in the previous CB3 process. CWG should formally establish whether this planning process is a response to the prior controversy or if it is independent of it.
- CWG should include greater representation from non-Chinese sectors of the neighborhood
- Ground rules must be established for participants to respect everyone at the table and deter accusations of maliciousness.
- A thorough education process must be part of the planning effort to inform community about how rezoning affects them.

It was agreed that as a first step, CWG needs to adopt a simple, straightforward Mission Statement.

**ACTION:** James Solomon will draft a simple mission statement for review at the next CWG meeting

**ACTION:** Steering Committee will meet to discuss possible governance structures and decision-making processes for future group consideration.

**CWG STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING:**

Second Tuesday of every month at 4pm  
 (NEXT MEETING, October 14<sup>th</sup> at CB1 Office, 49 Chambers Street, Room 709)  
 All CWG members interested in serving on the Steering Committee are welcome to attend

**CWG GENERAL MEETING:**

First Friday of every month at 10am (NEXT MEETING November 7<sup>th</sup>)

\* For further research, Ms. Baron suggested [www.mycity.org](http://www.mycity.org) which is MAS’ portal to New York City’s land use databases, 311, census, dept of building, and other information.

\*\* Ms. Sibblies directed those interested to read the 7-page resolution adopted by CB10 at [www.cb10.org](http://www.cb10.org)

MINUTES COMPILED BY AMY CHIN