

Civilbeat Op-ed

Chinatown Lost? City Should Rethink Affordable Housing Sale 'Travesty'

By Charles Wathen 08/28/2013

The current City proposal to sell their affordable housing units will have an extremely detrimental effect on the Chinatown community and its existing residents.

Based upon the current tenant mix — which is socially and economically diverse, compared to the tenant mix within the City's current proposal — we cannot comprehend how the City, State and Federal government can let this proposal go forward. The existing mix of residents was promised to remain forever as a condition to allow the construction of these properties in Chinatown. The properties in question were originally built on City parking lots, a move that caused such controversy that it took many years to pacify and reach agreement with the community and historical advocates.

The Environmental Impact Studies filed for each of these properties make it clear that the community was agreeing to the construction due to the diversity of the residents and the positive effects higher-income residents would have on the community. The City now proposes to remove these higher-income residents and replace them with low- and very-low income residents concentrated in high-rise buildings (which can include homeless and Section 8 tenants).

Many exceptions were made for these properties, including removing historical buildings and height variances based on the need to stimulate the area with higher-income residents. The City has most recently gone through a planning process for the Honolulu Rail and Neighborhood Transit-Oriented Developments, and has come to the same conclusions that higher-income residents would help stimulate economic growth in the area where it is already severely negatively impacted with far too many homeless and lower-income residents.

We have been told by land planners, architects, businesses owners, City Council members and other informed persons that they expect four things will happen to Chinatown if this proposed sale goes through:

- 1) Economically, there will be a loss of purchasing power, which will negatively impact merchants and the arts that are already struggling.
- 2) Socially, there will be an increased need for Social Services and police to handle the increase in lower-income residents and associated adverse effects that come with concentrating low- and very-low income residents in one neighborhood.
- 3) Physical property vacancies will increase, property values will decrease, and there will be a higher demand for more public maintenance.
- 4) Finally, this action will negate any chance for creating a sustainable TOD, which requires economic vitality.

Additionally, it should be noted that Chinatown is a National Historical Landmark District, and the change in use or intensity of these properties should trigger a supplemental Environmental Impact Study because of the economic, social, cultural and physical deterioration threats to the district.

The parties to this folly include the City Council, Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Services, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Hawaii Housing Finance and Development Corporation (HHFDC).

Because this proposal was approved by the former City Council on October 11, 2012, and pushed by the former Mayor, we have no idea how many of the current Council members are aware of the negative ramifications of this sale.

This new Administration and City Council seem only interested in balancing the City Budget with the sales proceeds and do not want to look into what the true social, economic and cultural effects will be. Those who misled the Council last year are still running the show and no one is being told the whole story or the facts.

Some of the existing residents will be displaced and the uncertainty of their futures is causing a tremendous amount of anxiety. When Mayor Carlisle announced the sale of these properties in his State of The City Address he said:

"Our number one goal is to preserve affordability... The rent restrictions currently in place will remain. We plan to harness the skills and resources of the private sector to create a better living environment for our residents."

However, that is not the case as we have discovered. The residents and community now find they have been grossly misled.

City Council and Mayor Caldwell need to re-look at this sale thoroughly and consider the residents and the community at large and how deeply this sale impacts them and their futures. The City Council and Mayor have the power to cancel this contract — they just need the political courage and will to do what's fair and right for the good of the community.

Please contact the Mayor and the Chairman of the City Council and all those involved with this folly and let them know of your concern. Without your input, this travesty will go forward and we all pay the price of losing our beloved Chinatown.

Charles Wathen is the executive director of the Hawaii Housing Alliance.

If your concerned please contact your city council woman Carol Fukunaga cafukunaga@honolulu.gov and Council Chair and President Ernest Martin at emartin@honolulu.gov . You can also write them and the Mayor at City and County of Honolulu, Honolulu Hale Honolulu, HI 96816.

