

Old Town/Chinatown

Summary of Issues and Opportunities

Below is a summary of issues and opportunities in the Old Town/Chinatown study area of the Central City. It was compiled by Bureau of Planning and Sustainability staff based on a number of sources, including a series of interviews with Old Town/Chinatown stakeholders, a review of previous planning projects in the area, and the 2010 Central City 2035 Subdistrict Profiles report. This document is meant as a starting place for Old Town/Chinatown planning efforts as part of the West Quadrant Plan process.



Historic Districts and Neighborhood Identity

- The Old Town/Chinatown area includes two overlapping but distinct Historic Districts: Skidmore/Old Town (a National Historic Landmark) and New Chinatown/Japantown. These two districts have some of Portland’s oldest commercial structures and evoke Portland’s early history.
- Current planning direction for the Skidmore/Old Town district, most recently articulated in the Ankeny/Burnside Development Framework, emphasizes preservation of historic structures while supporting new development that sensitively responds to the historic urban fabric.
 - Recent projects such as the University of Oregon Portland Center, Mercy Corps and the Oriental College of Medicine have successfully renovated historic buildings and begun to increase the district’s vitality.
 - Implementation of some recommended regulatory changes, including the adoption of new historic design guidelines and proposed height changes, remain unresolved.
- The overall direction for the New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District is not as clear. The identity of the district is more tied to its ethnic and cultural significance, as opposed to historic buildings per se, and it continues to face long-term challenges including disinvestment, lack of infill, complicated ownership structures, and the shift of Portland’s Asian communities away from the area.
 - Several new ideas about the future direction of New Chinatown/Japantown have emerged in recent years, including expanding its identity to encompass Pan-Asian themes, modern Asian design aesthetics and the promotion of entrepreneurship.
 - It’s not clear how these concepts fit with a more traditional approach to historic preservation and they could imply the need for changes to the regulatory framework in the district.

Neighborhood Vitality and Development Energy

- Old Town/Chinatown has a large number of older and historic buildings that are underutilized (particularly on upper stories) and in need of seismic and fire-life-safety upgrades and other significant reinvestments. In many cases, achievable rents in the area do not support rehabilitation of these structures without significant public subsidies or other sources of funding.
- Surface parking lots consume a significant portion of the two historic districts. These “missing teeth” in the built fabric reduce street-level activity and negatively impact the area’s identity and sense of place.
 - Redevelopment of vacant and surface parking lots is an important component for revitalizing the area. Additional strategies and incentives may be needed to encourage redevelopment of these lots while also addressing the parking needs of local businesses, the entertainment cluster and attractions such as the Chinese Garden and Saturday Market.
- A number of buildings in new Chinatown/Japantown have multiple, often absentee, shareholders, complicating efforts to renovate the structures.

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- Development regulations, including height and floor area ratio (FAR) limits and historic design guidelines, appear to be inconsistently applied in Old Town and may be discouraging new development. Current maximum heights and FAR within the Central City reflect a desire to extend the tallest buildings from downtown north through parts of Old Town/Chinatown and across the Willamette River into the Lloyd District. Within Old Town/Chinatown, this pattern raises issues related to the appropriate scale of buildings within and adjacent to the two historic districts. On the other hand, some property owners have indicated that existing entitlements within the historic districts are too low to justify new development on vacant parcels, many of which produce stable income streams as parking lots.
- A vibrant entertainment and nightlife scene has emerged in Old Town, enlivening the area late at night (particularly on Fridays and Saturdays) but creating inactive storefronts during the day.
 - Currently Old Town pedestrian activities is very episodic, with the greatest activity during weekend nights. This area lacks sufficient density and diversity of activities to support both active daytime and nightlife.
 - The nightlife scene creates public safety concerns, contributes to problems with vandalism, and generates conflicts with nearby housing and social services.
- There is a large supply of affordable housing in Old Town and a large percentage of its residents have low incomes. However, market-rate housing opportunities are limited and little new housing has been constructed in recent years. A number of stakeholders have indicated that a more diverse mix of housing affordability would improve Old Town's livability, public image and business environment.
- Most of the major public and private development and infrastructure projects in the past decade have relied significantly on the use of Urban Renewal funding and tax increment financing. However, the availability of urban renewal funds will decrease dramatically and will be more narrowly focused in coming years. The need for new and creative funding mechanisms has been identified.
- Block 33 (Jack's Chinatown Parking site) is a full-block redevelopment site in the center of New Chinatown/Japantown. New development on this lot could have a catalytic impact on investment in the district.
- The Old Town/Chinatown Business Association hasn't been active recently, although the recent reincarnation of the Old Town/Chinatown Neighborhood Association into the Old Town Community Association may reinvigorate business participation in the association, similar to the successful model used by the Lloyd Community Association. Previous studies have identified the need for an additional management entity or entities that could assist with public space programming, district advocacy and marketing, security, parking and transportation coordination and small business assistance.

Public Perceptions and Safety

- A variety of social services are located in Old Town, providing critically important services in a highly-accessible location. However this concentration also presents challenges to the area's retail environment and makes attracting new private investment more difficult.
- Many of the area's social service providers have reinvested in their buildings in recent years and solved some of the problems of large queues awaiting services on the streets. However, some providers of services to the homeless still accumulate crowds of clients on the street creating a negative environment for retail and commercial activity.
- The active entertainment and nightlife scene has increased concerns about public safety in the area, including vandalism, public intoxication, and the potential for pedestrian-auto conflicts.

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Broadway and Union Station

- Old Town is adjacent to the highly successful Pearl District to the west, but the development energy of the Pearl has not spread east of Broadway into Old Town/Chinatown. Some stakeholders have noted that NW Broadway doesn't feel like it is a part either Old Town or the Pearl District and have identified the need to better connect the two districts while improving the character of Broadway. Others have indicated that Old Town and the Pearl District each have assets that the other doesn't have and that planning and public investment should look at these two areas holistically.
- Union Station is one of Portland's signature landmarks. The 1972 Downtown Plan recognized Union Station as the transportation hub for inter- and intra-city transportation travel. Over the last 25-years, this hub function has been reinforced by the Greyhound Bus Terminal, Transit Mall, light rail transit, and the higher speed Cascadia passenger rail service between Eugene and Vancouver, British Columbia. However, Union Station is in need of significant repair and renovation work and Greyhound has greatly diminished its service.
 - The Union Station area has significant redevelopment potential, including Block R (former Trailways bus terminal site), and potential future redevelopment of the Greyhound terminal and the Post Office sites.
 - The Clock Tower at Union Station is an important visual landmark for the district.

Parking

- Historic buildings in this area were generally built during the streetcar era, without on-site parking. Surface parking lots scattered throughout Old Town provide parking for workers and visitors. As these lots are developed, the parking supply will be reduced. Some stakeholders have indicated that parking demand has already increased as redevelopment has proceeded in the Skidmore area and have suggested that a publicly owned parking structure (or structures) could alleviate this problem as new development occurs over time.
- Unlike in parts of Downtown and the Pearl District that have larger numbers of residents and workers and a different balance of housing affordability, the restaurant trade in Chinatown relies primarily on customers from outside the district, especially for the after work and early evening periods. The extension of metered on-street parking until 7:00 PM and on Sundays has hurt the restaurant trade in the area. Stakeholders have indicated that one of the reasons many Chinese restaurants have relocated to 82nd Avenue is the availability of free parking there.

Open Space

- The Lan Su Chinese Garden is an import asset for the Chinatown area and many stakeholders feel it is the "jewel" of Old Town, an important public attraction that needs supportive new development around it. However, the garden is an inward-looking facility that does not meet all of the open space needs of the area. Stakeholders have identified the need for a new, more publicly accessible open space, such as a public plaza and/or pocket parks that could be created as part of new development proposals.

Connectivity and Transportation

- The area north of Burnside has the typical 200' by 200' block pattern that has contributed to a pedestrian scale environment. Over time, several road improvements have impacted this area,

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including the widening of W. Burnside in the 1930's, which created a barrier with downtown, and construction of the Harbor Drive highway. Although Harbor Drive was removed in the early 1970's, remnants of this highway still exist, including the ramps at the west end of the Steel Bridge, and the Everett-Glisan couplet.

- In 2007, City Council adopted Resolution No. 36499 approving the Burnside-Couch streetcar couplet project. PBOT is proceeding with smaller improvements to W. Burnside, which suffers from difficult pedestrian crossings and high traffic volumes, but the long-term future of the streetcar couplet project is unclear.
- Potential street and ramp modifications at the west end of the Steel Bridge could provide new redevelopment opportunities, additional/improved crossings of Natio Parkway, and improvements to the visual quality of the area.
- The completion of the NW 3rd and 4th Avenue Streetscape project improved the character of the Chinatown area, with added street amenities and the innovative Festival Street design for NW Davis and NW Flanders (between NW 3rd and NW 4th). However, vandalism, poor maintenance and a lack of consistent management of the streetscapes have been a problem and the project has not stimulated economic development to the degree desired.
- The MAX line on SW/NW 1st Ave. creates access issues for other modes of transportation on portions of the street.
- Improving physical connectivity between Old Town and adjacent areas, including Downtown, the Pearl District and Waterfront Park can strengthen the vitality and economic health of the area. Opportunities could include:
 - Improvements to Davis and Flanders to reinforce connections with the Pearl District and Waterfront Park.
 - Strengthening 3rd and 4th avenues to reinforce connections with the downtown area.
 - Further implementation of the “Ankeny Walk of Fountains” concept to reinforce the connections between the Skidmore area and Downtown.
 - Improved pedestrian crossings and additional left turns on Burnside (interim improvements prior to full implementation of the Burnside-Couch Streetcar Couplet).