

CHINATOWN

The Boston Globe

Moving in, moving out

By Victoria Cheng, Globe Correspondent | July 6, 2008

Granite condo buildings loom over graying low-rises festooned with the colorful, haphazardly translated signs of local businesses.

Elderly residents shop at fruit stands while construction vehicles lumber through the streets. On weekends the restaurants brim with diners, ranging from college students eyeing the tripe with trepidation to large families gathering for dim sum.

But the influx of businesses and new residences into Chinatown obscures a simultaneous movement of people out of the neighborhood. After the Zoning Board's approval last week of a proposed 27-story structure on the site of the Dainty Dot Hosiery building on Essex Street, community members say they are looking for ways to put development decisions back in the hands of those most affected.

Residents got some help in June, when the Asian Community Development Corporation received a \$125,000 grant from the Ford Foundation to run virtual reality simulations that will create models of planned developments in Chinatown. Boston was one of five sites in the country to receive such a grant, which is intended to help communities address gentrification issues.

The money will pay for technology that integrates data - such as building models, zoning regulations, and population and employment estimates - into three-dimensional renderings on how these factors affect residents.

The organization hopes these models will help residents and businesses envision how developments will affect them, enabling them to benefit from the changes rather than simply suffering the effects.

Karen Chen, a paralegal with Greater Boston Legal Services, worked with a number of families that were priced out of their apartments above the Chau Chow City Restaurant on Essex Street after the Hamilton Co. bought the building in 2003.

"The units used to have families and newer immigrants who paid between \$700 and \$900 in rent," she said. "After Hamilton bought the building, rent went up to between \$1,500 and \$2,000." The legal services group and the families were unable to negotiate lower rents, Chen said.

Facing the higher rents, many residents prefer to move out as quickly as possible. One woman Chen contacted about being displaced from the Essex Street housing units expressed reluctance to tell her story publicly. "She felt that it's over, she's in public housing now, even though it's not in Chinatown, and there's nothing she can do about it," Chen said.

Paul Lee was born in Chinatown and lived there until he was 11, but his family moved to Brookline after its home was purchased by New England Medical Center in 1961. He noted that the cultural cohesiveness of a community depends heavily on geography.

"Growing up in Chinatown, not only were your friends there, but their parents knew who you were and watched over you, and it was a very close-knit community," he said. "When we were dispersed, it was harder for us to socialize with other Chinese families and our friends from Chinatown. Gradually, we lost touch with a lot of our friends."

He added that Chinatown has also changed dramatically in the last few decades. "In the old days, you could walk down Hudson Street, and people would be sitting outside on a stoop and the whole time you were walking down, you would run into a lot of friends. Nowadays, you have to make play dates before kids can play with somebody."

Small-business owners, those who give Chinatown its characteristic hole-in-the-wall snack shops and who provide the community with basic services such as accounting and hair styling, also suffer from the effects of gentrification, said Jeremy Liu, executive director of the Asian Community Development Corporation.

The luxury apartment complex Archstone Boston Common, completed in 2006, boasts retail rental rates per square foot

similar to other buildings in the neighborhood, he said, but its retail spaces are much larger than the size of a typical Chinatown business space.

"Even if the price is the same per square foot, no one in Chinatown can afford it because they don't want that much space and can't afford the total occupancy cost," Liu said.

Local businesses that have expressed interest have inquired about "bringing in three or four other small businesses and dividing it up between them.

"That's just not going to happen, because that's not the kind of retail Archstone is looking for," Liu said.

James Jennings, a professor of urban policy and planning at Tufts University, notes there is an economic theory that "if we take care of the bigger institutions, there will be 'trickle-down' benefits to everyone.

"This formula has failed in many places across urban society," he added.

"The most effective strategy for the city is to ensure that development responds to the needs of the neighborhoods, including its microenterprises and community-based organizations."

For now, however, a host of large-scale developments is on the way in Chinatown.

The recently approved plans for the red-brick Dainty Dot building include razing the structure and replacing it with a residential tower with a sweeping glass façade.

There are also 10 other projects in the pipeline under the Boston Redevelopment Authority's purview, all in a neighborhood smaller than nearby Boston Common.

As fuel prices rise and close-in neighborhoods become more attractive, Jennings said, "we will probably see such pressures [to develop land] increase."

"I think the fear that a lot of activists have is that Chinatown in Boston will become like Chinatown in D.C.," said Chinese Progressive Association member Amy Leung.

"There's a fear it will become a playground for yuppies, with just Chinese restaurants but no Chinese residents with the culture and the fabric of the community." ■

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