



Community Development

919 Palm Street, San Luis Obispo, CA 93401-3218
805.781.7170
slocity.org

Staff Memorandum

CHC meeting of November 18, 2024

TO: Cultural Heritage Committee

FROM: Brian Leveille, Principal Planner

BY: Natalie Harnett, Policy and Project Manager

SUBJECT: DISCUSSION ITEM 5A – CHONG'S HOME MADE CANDIES SIGN AND HISTORIC CHINATOWN INTERPRETIVE PANELS

Background

In early 2023, the City launched a project to restore and reinstall the original neon sign that once adorned Chong's Homemade Candy store at 798 Palm Street. Due to the project's complexity, it was divided into two phases. Phase I involved installing the sign and making surrounding improvements, including the addition of a Chinatown emblem, painted lettering, and a neon light border. Phase II will install a permanent interpretive display (made up of three panels) that tell a more in-depth history of the sign and the Chinatown district. On July 24, 2023, staff presented Phase I to the CHC for feedback and recommendations, with plans to return later for Phase II.



At the July meeting, the CHC's primary feedback was a preference for the sign to be installed on the original building. However, they acknowledged the logistical challenges involved in doing so. Overall, the committee expressed support for the project and was eager to see it progress.

The neon sign installation was completed on February 8, 2024, with an informal "unveiling" during the 2024 Lunar New Year celebration on February 10, 2024. The installation, paired with the festivities, underscored the significance of honoring the Chinese community's history, influence, and contributions to the City. The positive reception from the community highlighted the importance of the City's efforts to create cultural events and spaces, reinforcing the goal of building a positive, inclusive, and welcoming environment for all.

Item 5a. Chong's Home Made Candies Sign & Historic Chinatown Interpretive Panels

While Phase II was underway, a temporary informative sign was installed below the neon sign to provide context on why the sign is there and includes several original photographs of Mr. Chong and the original store location.

Phase II – Status Update

Over the last six months, City staff worked in close partnership with consultant Pierre Rademaker, who was responsible for designing the panels and conducting extensive historical research to create the content. Many drafts of the display underwent review and editing and were distributed to subject matter experts and stakeholders for feedback.

The purpose of this display is to not only contextualize the neon sign located on the Parking Garage but also to offer passersby an insight into the cultural heritage of that section of the City, along with the historical background of the Chinatown area. While it is an impossible endeavor to encapsulate the entire history within merely three panels, significant efforts have been made to highlight the key elements. Additionally, a variety of historic photographs were included to engage the interest of those passing by and to enhance the storytelling experience.

Outreach and Feedback

In early June 2023, the DEI Manager was tasked to do community and expert outreach/engagement to ensure the design process and development of the project maintained cultural and language significance to the Chinese community. In July 2023, the DEI Manager had met with Dr. Andrew Morris, current Interim Director for the Office of Academic Programs and Planning at Cal poly, and a professor and expert in the East Asia, Modern Chinese, and Taiwanese history fields. Dr. Morris provided context in understanding cultural implications from the Chinese experience, and considerations on language highlighting the blooming of the Chinese Empire that marked cultural identity. Ongoing conversations took place until December 2023. In August 2023, the DEI Manager had also met with Dr. Grace Yeh, Professor at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo under the Ethnic Studies Department, whose areas of concentration highlight Asian American Studies, Comparative Ethnic Literature, and Representations of race, gender, and sexuality among others. Dr. Yeh provided critical feedback on concepts and implications that are essential to the proper representation and narrative-building of the Chinese experience, and provided additional resources and research for consideration, which included direct contact with Laura Sorvetti, a Special Collection Archivist who shared news articles, one thesis highlighting Chinese history in SLO Chinatown, and photographic archives from the Chong's family.

In the October 2023, additional outreach was conducted with founder and president of the Asian American & Pacific Islander (AAPI) of San Luis Obispo County, Mia Shin, who provided cultural context about the intention and outcome of such project, and the proper ways in which to celebrate and honor the Chong's legacy. Likewise, Mrs. Shin highlighted potential concerns about the installation as it pertains to community reception. City staff took into consideration all outreach and feedback provided, which ultimately led to the completion of Phase I of the project and an outline for Phase II of the project.

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The draft interpretive panels were sent to the following stakeholders or subject matter experts for review in October 2024:

- Brian Lawler - Mr. Chong's Family Friend, sign donor
- Mia Shin - AAPI SLO County President
- Dr. Morris - Cal Poly, Ph.D, Modern Chinese History
- Dr. Grace Yeh - Cal Poly, Ethnic Studies Professor, Asian American Studies
- Alice Loh - Retired Cal Poly Professor, local landscape architect (Cheng Park)
- Scott Lathrap/Mona Tucker - YTT Contacts
- Native American Heritage Commission (NAHC) Tribal Contact list
- Dr. William Watson - Ah Louis Family
- Frank DuFault - Close family contact of Chong Family, helped manage estate
- Paul Kwong & Russell Kwong - Owners of Mee Heng Low Noodle House
- Amber Karson - Ah Louis store tenant, Lunar New Year celebration contact

All of the feedback received was positive, with many expressing gratitude for the recognition of the Chinatown district. Several individuals offered thoughtful suggestions regarding language and verbiage, and these insights were incorporated into the final draft.

At the November 18, 2024 CHC meeting, staff will provide an update on Phase II of the project for Committee discussion and to receive any feedback and recommendations. Staff will also present the project to the Human Relations Committee at their December Meeting. The goal is to have the panels finalized and installed by the 2025 Lunar New Year (January 29, 2025).

Attachments:

A – PDF Copy of Draft Panel

B – Combined Concept of Sign and Interpretive Panel