

Chinatown seeking a rebirth

BY PRADNYA JOSHI
STAFF WRITER

Weaving through the crowds of Chinatown, Robert Weber points out the cleanup problems in dire need of help.

It's not just the garbage piling up in corners or the stench of sewage, seafood and other mixtures wafting in the air.

Among the signs of neglect: Many of the benches along the Allen Street corridor have been dilapidated for nearly 25 years, some sitting as hollow iron shells missing their wood slats. Others are strewn with "Caution" tape.

But starting in January, two shifts of uniformed workers will work seven days a week to clean up the streets, said Weber, director of the Rebuild Chinatown Initiative, a group created to study the needs of the community. The resulting community-based Chinatown Partnership, thanks to new grants and studies, will start carrying out its mission, aimed at economic development for one of the city's most historic neighborhoods.

Road to recovery

The creation of the Chinatown Partnership is just one part of a new push for the neighborhood that is a vital section of downtown but has often been sidestepped when it came to economic-stimulus or development programs.

Now, at least a few initiatives are getting off the ground. For one, the Lower Manhattan Development Corp. earmarked \$7 million of the \$800 million in community grant money it received to rebuild lower Manhattan after Sept. 11, 2001, toward the program to clean up Chinatown's streets. And just this June, the state government agreed to deem Chinatown an "Empire Zone," allowing businesses that create new jobs in the area to get tax breaks and other benefits.

"Chinatown was probably the most economically devastated area as a result of Sept. 11," said Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Manhattan), who pushed for the designation for years. "The concept of making an Empire Zone was to attract jobs."

The Chinatown Partnership will technically be a "business improvement district," charged with improving the look of its designated neighborhood, which is home to 80,000 residents. New York City has 51 such districts, ranging from the high-profile Times Square Alliance to smaller, neighborhood groups scattered throughout Brooklyn.

Previously overlooked

Chinatown's residents for decades were dismissed by politicians as unimportant because they weren't believed to have the political influence to shape elections. And street closures, a drop in tourism and job losses after the Sept. 11 attacks further put the neighborhood out of sight and out of mind when it came to much of the recovery aid.

"In terms of bringing back employment, this is an uphill battle," said K.Y. Chow, president of GM Printing Inc. and a board member of the Chinatown Partnership. "We need more support to wipe out the problems in Chinatown; we need a lot of support from the city, state and federal ."

But nearly four years after the attacks, the community is finally seeing some money and attention coming its way. Some changes came after the nonprofit group Asian Americans for Equality sponsored the Rebuild Chinatown Initiative, which surveyed 3,000 people and interviewed nearly 100 before issuing reports about the problems that residents, visitors and businesses identified.

The initiative "came from the feeling that the community was not part of the larger recovery" after Sept. 11, said Christopher Kui, executive director of Asian Americans for Equality. "It's very important that Chinatown maintain its link to the community."

The \$7 million for cleanup will be enough to get the program off to a four-year start, Weber said. In addition, the LMDC, the city-state agency, has agreed to spend \$25 million to study traffic problems, particularly around Park Row and the Bowery.

Establishing priorities

Among the other goals of the newly formed Chinatown Partnership: improving signs and navigation maps so visitors can see the historic sights of the neighborhood; sponsoring a "Night Market" for merchants to sell their wares and to attract tourists; and lighting up noteworthy buildings and archways to create a warmer look at night.

Weber said that, long-term, the Chinatown Partnership is thinking even bigger: to market Chinatown as a natural bridge to the Pacific Rim by having American financial and trading firms locate offices in the neighborhood, thereby attracting high-paying jobs; to push for improving waterfront access to the East River; and to have the city upgrade and update the aging sewer systems.

At the same time, however, many in Chinatown disagree with the priorities that have been set, because they cater more to the merchant class and less to new immigrants and to workers' needs, said Peter Kwong, professor of urban affairs in the Asian American Studies Department at Hunter College.

"We have different versions of what revitalizing Chinatown means," Kwong said.

Already, gentrification is driving out garment manufacturers that cannot afford the rent, he said. And in many other cities, Chinatown areas have become more of a tourist attraction than a neighborhood in which immigrants can afford to live.

"Living in this gentrification environment is much more difficult for residents," Kwong said. "Actually, what they're doing is killing the indigenous culture."

But those who support the initiatives say they are aware of the overpriced housing conditions and the needs of immigrants. "We also know that Chinatown is very much a working community," Kui said. "People want to continue to build that job base."

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