

## 2. COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

### Overview

To acquire a better understanding of the issues in the District from the perspectives of the local community, we conducted a series of interviews with the staff of selected local community organizations in the neighborhood. With the exception of the BIA where only the Executive Director was available for interview, all other interviews were focus-group interviews. The organizations, including the BIA, Chong Wa Benevolent Association, Chinatown Chamber of Commerce, Inter\*Im Community Development Association, International District Housing Alliance, Little Saigon Business Association and Wing Luke Asian Museum, were selected to reflect the diverse perspectives in the District, including those of the business organizations, social service organizations and ethnic associations.

The interview questions (see next page) were adapted from a list originally developed by Professor Lynne Manzo and were designed primarily to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the area in terms of spatial functions and characteristics and the needs for improvement as perceived by the local community. By comparing the responses from the different organizations, a secondary objective was to identify common as well as competing views and perceptions within the District toward the various issues.

This chapter summarizes the findings from the interviews as organized by the different groups. By analyzing the results of the interviews, we identified five major areas of concerns with implications for an urban design plan for the District, which are *street livability*, *cultural and place identities*, *balance neighborhood and development needs*, *open/green space*, and *development guidelines*. The summary of the interviews is followed by a description of the five major areas of concern.

**Focus Group Interview Questions:**

1. Do you live/work in the Chinatown-ID?
2. What does your organization do?
3. What do you think are the greatest strengths/assets of this neighborhood?
4. What are its greatest weaknesses, challenges, and/or problems?
  - What improvements are needed or would you like to see?
  - What works well and what doesn't?
5. What do you think can be done to meet these challenges/needs?
6. How do you think the Chinatown-ID is perceived by the rest of the city?
  - Do you think that is positive or negative?
7. What message or image of the Chinatown-ID would you like to convey to the city?
  - What do you think can be done to facilitate this message/image you would like conveyed?
8. What are the places in neighborhood that are important to the communities?
  - Where do people gather or meet?
  - Where are the socially and historically important places?

## Chinatown-International District Business Improvement Area (BIA)

- Established in 1994
- Extends from 4<sup>th</sup> Ave to I-5 & Dearborn Street to Yesler Street
- Made flags and painted columns under I-5
- Installed dragons on light poles
- Organized Lunar New Year celebration

Students interviewed members of the Chinatown-International District Business Improvement Area (BIA). Most members are shop owners who do not necessarily live in the International District. The BIA was established in 1994. It extends from 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue on the west to Interstate 5 on the east. Dearborn Street forms its southern border and its northern border is Yesler Street. Some of its activities include making flags for the International District, painting the columns under Interstate 5 with an Asian motif, organizing events such as the Lunar New Year celebration and installing dragon poles.

### Strengths & Assets

Students asked Executive Director Pauline Zeestraten of the BIA to identify some of the District's strengths and weaknesses. She identified as a strength the number and variety of affordable restaurants in the District that attract people from other areas. She also said that the fact that the district serves as a hub for Asian Americans was an important strength. Some of the District's most important assets are its many landmarks and gathering places. Among these places she listed was Hing Hay Park on King Street but she said that this park needs improvement. Other important locations included the Danny Woo Garden, the community bulletin board on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and the elderly organizations located in the basement of the Bush Hotel.

### Weaknesses, Challenges & Problems

Although Ms. Zeestraten said that restaurants are an important business in the District, their over-proliferation has become a problem. She said

### Strengths & Assets

1. Number and variety of affordable restaurants
2. Hub for Asian-American community
3. Gathering places such as Hing Hay Park, Danny Woo Garden, community bulletin board on 7<sup>th</sup> Street.
4. Social services in the Bush Hotel

### Challenges

1. Shortage of Parking Spaces
2. Street sanitation
3. Substandard and vacant buildings (Seattle's highest concentration)
4. Aging population

### Strategies

1. Find ways to increase available parking spaces
2. Establish shuttle bus service to the District

### Perceptions of the District

1. Substandard buildings create a bad impression.
2. People do not see a reason to visit the District.
3. People do not know the boundaries of the District. They confuse surrounding areas for being part of the District.

### Communicating Positive Image

1. Create more social spaces to attract young Asian Americans
2. Install public art to reinforce Asian American identity

## 2. Community Interviews

that there is not enough regulation concerning the growth of the number of restaurants. This is resulting in their failure through competition and a lack of parking spaces. Short-term parking spaces are often occupied by people who work in the district, resulting in a loss of customers. This also damages businesses as potential employees may choose not to work in the district because they cannot find parking. When there is a Mariners game at Safeco Field parking problems are made worse. BIA Concern was also expressed over the physical condition of the neighborhood. Streets remain dirty because there are no street sweepers working in the District. Ms. Zeestraten also cited the prevalence of substandard buildings in the district as being a problem. There are 9 substandard buildings in 26 blocks, making this the highest concentration in Seattle. She said that it is difficult to get owners to rehabilitate their substandard buildings. There are a number of reasons for this. Some inherited their buildings from an older generation and do not have the necessary knowledge or incentive to rehabilitate the buildings. Others may be wary of the financial risk of investing in their buildings. Finally, the aging population of the District was cited as a potential future challenge. As the older generation gradually disappears, more middle-income people will move into new housing projects. They will have different needs that the District will have to meet.

### Strategies for Meeting Challenges

Although the District's review board includes requirements for providing parking, the requirements are easy to meet without really making an impact on the problem. To alleviate the parking situation BIA suggested working with Metro to establish shuttle bus services from other parts of the city to the District.

### Perceptions of the District

The perception of the District by the rest of the city was also discussed during this interview. It was described that some people have a bad impression of the area, partly because of the large number of substandard buildings. This impression is increased by the fact that many people confuse surrounding, run-down areas, with the District. The BIA would like to make this distinction clear to the rest of the city. It was argued that many people do not see any need to visit the District.

To attract people to the District, it was said that the District should pursue its role as a hub for the Asian American community in Seattle. The BIA would like to promote the Asian character of the neighborhood as well as its history. This would include acknowledging all ethnic groups in the neighborhood. They would like to avoid the District becoming a "Disney" version of the Asian-American community, however.

### Communicating Positive Messages about the District

Ms. Zeestraten was asked how to best convey the image of the District the BIA would like the rest of the city to have. She said that there is a need for more social places in the District. This would help to attract young Asian Americans to the District so that it will continue to be the hub for the next generation. She also suggested more signs, dragon poles and other pieces of public art to enhance the Asian character of the area.

### Other Issues

Other issues discussed in the interview included the debate over the name of the District. For outsiders, the name "International District" may not let people know what the District is about.

## Chinatown Chamber of Commerce

- Founded in 1963
- Advocate for Chinese businesses
- Wing Luke was a founding member and early leader

Students interviewed board members of the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce (CCC). The Chinatown Chamber of Commerce was founded in 1963. Its primary role is to further the interests of Chinese businesses in the area. One of its early leaders was Wing Luke. As a Seattle city council member he was the first Chinese American to hold elected office in the Northwest.

### Strengths & Assets

Members of the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce cited several strengths of the District. It provided the roots for life in a new country and continues to be the focal point of the Chinese American community in the Northwest. It provides services and restaurants for this community. Even after many people save up money and move to the suburbs they return to use these services. They are also drawn by the history of the community. The painting of the columns under Interstate 5 and other public art enhance the Chinese American history and feel of the District. Finally, the district's proximity to Interstate 5 increases its accessibility to residents of other areas.

### Weaknesses, Challenges & Problems

Members of the CCC mentioned a number of weaknesses of the District as well. One concern was disagreement among different stakeholders in the District. They said it is hard to get different cultural groups and interests to agree. Another challenge to the District is the lack of affordable housing. There is also the tendency for many to migrate to the suburbs. These two factors make it difficult to maintain the character of the area. One concern discussed during the interview is common to many in the District. This is the lack of parking in the area as well as problems with gridlock and traffic safety. Finally, public safety was mentioned as an important factor in attracting visitors to the area.

### Strengths & Assets

1. Focal Point of Chinese-American Community
2. Services and Restaurants for Chinese-American Community
3. History, art and character of the district
4. Accessibility to other parts of town

### Challenges

1. Disagreements among stakeholders
2. Lack of housing
3. Migration to the suburbs
4. Traffic and parking congestion
5. Public safety

### Strategies

1. Shuttle bus to downtown to relieve congestion
2. Streetscape improvements to attract more visitors

### Perceptions of the District

1. The district is mysterious and only curious and adventurous visit
2. Crime
3. Confusion over name and ethnic identity

### Communicating Positive Image

1. Promote the Chinese community in the District
2. Preserve, highlight and enhance Chinese characters on the street
3. Chinese gate to delineate Chinatown
4. Revive "Chinatown" as a name for at least part of the District

## 2. Community Interviews

### **Strategies for Meeting Challenges**

Members of the CCC made a number of suggestions to counter these issues. To alleviate parking and traffic problems they suggested operating a small bus to shuttle people from downtown. This would bring visitors from hotels and restaurants. They would also like to conduct a beautification campaign, including alley cleaning and building improvements to attract more visitors.

### **Perceptions of the District**

The focus group also discussed perceptions of the District by the rest of the city. According to them, many people think of the District as being “mysterious” and that only the curious and adventurous visit. They also say that the District is perceived as being dangerous and unsafe. The argument over the name of the District has also sent some undesirable messages. There is confusion over the correct name of the District. It creates the perception that there are not a lot of Chinese in the area. They say that different ethnic groups in the District need their own identities. They say that the current name International District lumps everyone into a culturally indistinguishable group.

### **Communicating Positive Messages about the District**

Members of the CCC would like to promote the Chinese character of the District. They are concerned about the Chinese character being eliminated or blended with other cultures to the point that is unrecognizable. They would like Seattle’s Chinese community to have as strong of a Chinese character as those of other cities.

To promote the Chinese character of their community, members of the CCC favor a number of steps. They would increase the visibility of Chinese culture in the area. They would like to preserve, highlight and enhance Chinese characters on the street. They would like to install a Chinese gate to make the entrance of the area obvious. This would include a pair of lions, which are a symbol of Chinese culture. They would like to promote Chinese institutions such as Family shrines and Chinese opera clubs that the public does not currently know about. They also suggest changing the name of the District, or at least part of it, back to Chinatown. They would accept the name “Chinatown-International

District”, however. This would help in marketing the Chinese character of the District. Overall, they would like to do more to communicate the image of Chinatown and to conduct more community projects to enhance its image.

## Chong Wa Benevolent Association

- Building completed in 1929
- Umbrella organization for Chinese groups in Washington State
- Offers language classes, citizenship classes and holds events

On May 8, 2002 three University of Washington professors and a graduate student held a focus group with members of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association to find out some of their views on the Chinatown-International District. Chong Wa was founded in 1929 as an umbrella organization for Chinese organizations in Washington state.

### Strengths & Assets

#### Sense of Community

When asked what makes Chinatown unique, members of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association said that this is a “strong community”. This is shown in the fact that “you can walk down the street and you see people you’ve seen before. You just kind of nod to them, you don’t even have to say hello.” They credit this sense of community to the Chinese culture they were brought up in. Although they acknowledge some problems with crime in the area, they say they usually feel safe walking around Chinatown. They also say that this is an area that welcomes visitors. Families are a particularly important part of the fabric of the community. Focus group participants said that people may not know you personally but they know your family. As a result, even people you are not related to become like relatives, resulting in a caring community. As evidence, they cited services for the elderly, immigrants, the youth and non-English speakers. Another thing that makes Chinatown unique is the fact that it is the focal point for Chinese culture in the area. This leads to a sense of ethnic pride and a sense of cultural identity in the area. It also attracts outsiders such as tourists and school groups who want to learn more about the Chinese culture and lifestyle. According to focus group participants, Chinatown transcends the normal

### Strengths & Assets

1. Sense of Community
2. Buildings owned by Chinese-American families for generations
3. Important places such as the Chong Wa building and the Wing Luke building
4. Chinese-American institutions and traditions

### Challenges

1. Name and identity of the District
2. Impact of new stadiums
3. Elderly population needs care
4. Children/youth need activities

### Strategies

1. Include “Chinatown” name to increase marketability of the Chinatown-International District
2. Promote Chinatown as a distinct community

### Perceptions of the District

1. Some are not aware of the existence of Chinatown in Seattle
2. A place to learn about Chinese culture
3. Chinatown has lost its negative connotations as a segregated neighborhood
4. Seattle Chinatown represented internationally by the Drill Team

### Communicating Positive Image

1. Welcome visitors to Chinatown
2. Promote Chinatown as a place to learn about Chinese culture
3. Promote strong families in the district
4. Communicate to the general public the significance of Chinatown

## 2. Community Interviews

definition of a neighborhood and encompasses the broader Chinese community in the area. According to one member

*“We identify with Chinatown. No matter where we live, Chinatown is our....community that is region wide, and Chinatown is the center of that.”*

Chinatown includes every person of Chinese descent who looks to Chinatown as the center of their community. They are just as much a part of the community as if they lived there. That is why many of them come here for a Chinese meal even though there are Chinese restaurants in other areas as well. Members of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association say that the concept of Chinatown as being more important than just a neighborhood has been difficult to communicate to people outside of their community.

### Chinese-owned Buildings

Another unique aspect of Chinatown is the fact that its buildings represent the history of the Chinese community in Seattle. Many of the buildings in the area were owned by some of the first Chinese people to arrive in the area. They organized into family associations and built many of the properties in the District. Many members of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association grew up in and around these buildings. As one member said “Chinatown has been my place for all my life.” In some cases, the buildings are still owned by the original families. Although many have moved to other neighborhoods, they are still drawn to the old neighborhood. The buildings are tangible reminders of the uniqueness of Chinatown.

### Important Places in the Community

Members of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association were asked what they thought were some of the most important and meaningful places in Chinatown. They mentioned some of the properties that have long been in the Chinese community. This includes the Chong Wa Association building and the property behind it. This property “belongs to the entire community.” Another one of the buildings that has been owned by the Chinese community for decades was an opera house in the 1920s. Yet another building once housed the Chinese school in Seattle. Perhaps

some of the most meaningful places in Chinatown are the family shrines that have been maintained over the generations. The Association conducts a tour that takes visitors to 12 of the most important places in Chinatown.

### Institutions and Traditions

The focus group also discussed some of the important institutions and traditions in Chinatown. One of the most important is the Wing Luke Museum. Other important establishments are the many businesses in Chinatown. Restaurants in particular serve as gathering places. Another important entity in the community is the Drill Team. It has been performing for 50 years. They are a staple at the Sea Fair parade and they march at the Chinatown-International District Street Fair. They have performed internationally for distinguished government officials and have marched in parades around the world.

### Chinatown: an International Phenomenon

Seattle’s Chinatown has counterparts all over the world. Most people are aware that there are Chinatowns in Canada, as well as major American cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. New York, in fact, has more than one Chinatown. Southeast Asian cities such as Bangkok and East Asian cities such as Yokohama also have Chinatowns. What is surprising is that there are even Chinatowns in Dakar, Senegal as well as Barrio Chine in Spain. Chong Wa Benevolent Association members take pride in being part of an international community.

### **Weaknesses, Challenges & Problems**

#### “Chinatown” verses “International District”

One of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association members was asked to express his views on the name of Chinatown-International District. He said he is concerned that not calling the area Chinatown is resulting in a loss of business. He fears that tourists are not aware that Seattle has a Chinatown and that the name International District does not communicate the neighborhood’s identity to potential customers.



Another member of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association also gave several cultural and historical reasons for wanting the District to be called Chinatown. He cites the many Chinese businesses and institutions in the area and says that this history should be acknowledged. He also cites cultural pride and the fact that this area was called Chinatown for decades. Many of the members of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association grew up calling the District Chinatown. It was pointed out that the area is called Chinatown on the National Historic Register.

Although many members of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association said that the name Chinatown once had negative connotations, this is not the case anymore. At one time, Chinatown was “the Chinese ghetto”; a poor part of town where Chinese people lived segregated from the rest of society. But more recently it has simply become the place where Chinese restaurants are concentrated. Some members said they accept the name Chinatown/International District, especially since it is the one officially adopted by the City of Seattle. They consider this a compromise. They do not want the name Chinatown deleted completely, however. They want to be a distinct community.

### Other Issues

Aside from the debate over the name of this area, focus group participants expressed concern over the impact of stadiums on the area. They say that when a game is taking place at one of the stadiums it discourages visitors from going to Chinatown. Other challenges also exist in this community. There is a need to care for the elderly. The community relies on volunteers to do much of the work. Another need is to care for the children in the community. The Chinese Athletic Association exists to fill the need for youth activities. The Drill Team also helps to fill this need. Members of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association concluded by mentioning two other issues of concern. They would like to see decisions in this area made by the agreement of all concerned parties. They would like various organizations involved in decision making to actively seek the input of members of the Chinese community and they would like to avoid assumptions being made about what is best for Chinatown.

## **Inter\*Im Community Development Association**

- Founded in 1969
- Mission is to revitalize Chinatown-International District
- Housing and Public Safety among the early issues it addressed
- Inter\*Im Community Development Association founded in 1979

Students interviewed staff of the Inter\*Im Community Development Association on April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2002. Inter\*Im was founded in 1969. Its mission is to help revitalize the Chinatown/International District community. It originally tackled the problems of housing shortages, public safety and the effects of I-5 construction. In 1979 Inter\*Im established Inter\*Im Community Development Association, a non-profit community development corporation, to continue working to promote the revitalization of the International District community for the benefit of its low income and minority residents, and small businesses. Inter\*Im has worked to promote revitalization, but without gentrification and displacement, and has been actively involved in issues affecting the broader Asian-Pacific community.

### **Strengths & Assets**

The focus group mentioned a number of positive aspects of the District. They mentioned the strong sense of community that exists here. People know each other in the neighborhood and work together to accomplish common goals. This is true of people who live in the neighborhood as well as people who live elsewhere but work and play in the District. Certain locations help to promote this sense of community. Important community gathering places mentioned were the Danny Woo Garden, Hing Hay Park and the Union Station Plaza space. Restaurants, nightclubs such as the Aristocrat and the Ritz Dance club were also mentioned as important gathering places. Important commercial spaces are Uwajimaya and the Saturday market in Little Saigon at 12<sup>th</sup> and Jackson. Family Associations and the Chinese Opera at the Chong Wa building were also mentioned as important cultural and social institutions. They also mentioned the high number of social services and small businesses as being an asset of the

## 2. Community Interviews

### Strengths & Assets

1. Sense of community
2. Gathering places for the community
3. Social services
4. Small businesses
5. Inclusive, Pan-Asian nature of the community
6. History of the District

### Challenges

1. Vacant buildings
2. New construction not appropriate to the District
3. Building design guidelines are not adequate to prevent inappropriate development
4. Lack of open space designed for public use
5. Public safety concerns: drug use, pedestrian safety, children's safety

### Strategies

1. Marketing campaign
2. Create more public housing in vacant buildings
3. Implement new design guidelines
4. Streetscape improvements such as public art and cultural icons
5. Remove dumpsters and clean up alleys
6. Increase open-space and plant more trees
7. Improve pedestrian safety by installing more crosswalks and lights
8. Visibly increase security patrols to deter crime

### Perceptions of the District

1. Lack of public awareness of the District
2. Lack of public knowledge of diversity in the district
3. Perception of the District as being a high crime area
4. Many people appreciate the central location of the district
5. District seen as being a gateway to the US for Asian immigrants

community. They see the inclusive, Pan-Asian nature of the community as being a positive aspect. The history of the area and its density contribute to the unique identity of the area.

### Weaknesses, Challenges & Problems

Inter\*Im also cited some challenges to the International District. One was the issue of vacant buildings in the District. They believe owners of vacant buildings should sell their properties to be made into low or mixed income housing. They expressed concern over new buildings that do not address street conditions, are made from poor materials and do not relate to the historic character of the District. They cite a lack of building design guidelines as a contributing factor to this problem. What open spaces exist, the staff of Inter\*Im says, are designed to benefit developers, not the community. There is also a lack of a fitness center in the neighborhood. Inter\*Im staff members also mentioned public safety concerns as significant challenges to the District. They say the neighborhood is not kid-friendly. There is a high drug use rate. They also say there is a lack of safe connections with the rest of the city such as pedestrian thoroughfares.

### Strategies for Meeting Challenges

Inter\*Im staff members made a number of suggestions for improving conditions in the District. They suggested a marketing campaign to increase the profile of the District. Creating more housing would lead to an increase in the diversity of commercial amenities such as a hardware store, a tailor and small grocery stores. They say that this would take some time, however. They suggest implementing new design guidelines to ensure new buildings fit the character of the area. They also suggest streetscape improvements such as public art and cultural icons to remind people they are in the International District. They also suggest removing dumpsters from alleys to improve their appearance. They would like to see an increase in open spaces designed to benefit the community. At the very least they would like to see more trees planted in the neighborhood. Compared to other neighborhoods in Seattle, the District is clearly lacking as much open space and greenery. People who live here don't have easy access out of neighborhood because they don't own cars and because the public transportation is not as good as other cities. For this reason it is even more important to

improve open space within the neighborhood and to improve its accessibility to other parts of the city. They suggest increasing connections to Pioneer Square. They would also like to see changes made to make the area safer. They would like to visibly increase security from 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue to Little Saigon to deter crime.

### **Perceptions of the District**

The Inter\*Im staff also discussed what they think is the perception of the District by the rest of the city. They cite a lack of public awareness of the District in the rest of the city. Many people outside of the District are aware of the shopping and eating opportunities but do not know that this is a community with 3,000 residents. Evidence of a lack of public knowledge about the District is the fact that many are not aware of the diversity of cultures represented here. They say that the physical dilapidation of buildings increases the perception that this is a dangerous neighborhood. The Inter\*Im staff also pointed to the public perception of the District being unsafe, especially at night. This is especially true because of the drug problem in the area. On the positive side, people like the District's central location close to downtown as well as the Metro free ride zone that extends to the District. They also say the general public perception of the District is that it is a gateway to the United States for Asian immigrants.

## **International District Housing Alliance (IDHA)**

Students interviewed the staff of the International District Housing Alliance (IDHA) on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2002, to find out what they see as some of the assets and problems in the International District as well as some possible solutions. The IDHA was founded in 1979 to advocate and promote affordable housing. It is the primary housing agency serving the Asian and Pacific Islander community in Seattle. It serves the cultures in this community by producing materials in their languages.

### **Strengths & Assets**

Staff members of IDHA cited a number of attributes as assets to the District's community. They cited the history of this area as a home to the Asian American community as well as its cultural heritage. This community has continuity because it is a place that some families have lived in for generations. The language support and social services that exist here attract many residents to this area. These services include IDHA, the Bush Hotel which houses 6 social service agencies and the Asian Resource Center. The existence of affordable housing also helps retain residents. Despite widespread impressions to the contrary, the District is also relatively safe according to staff members of IDHA. This community has many opportunities for recreation and education as well as tourism. Some of these include Hing Hay Park, the Danny Woo Gardens, the Wing Luke Museum as well as many interesting shops. These factors contribute to the strong community feeling in the District.

### **Weaknesses, Challenges & Problems**

The staff of IDHA also discussed some of the challenges confronting the District's community. They mentioned the need for the community to be more inclusive. They say some members of the community are not heard so they give up trying to be involved. There is a need to recognize the needs of residents especially in regard to age and income. Those who do not speak English, especially the elderly, need to be included by increasing dialogue in their language. There is also a need for physical improvements to the community. This would include the construction of a community center and library.

## 2. Community Interviews

### Strengths & Assets

1. History of the District as home to Asian-American community
2. Language support and social services
3. Affordable housing
4. Relatively safe neighborhood
5. Recreation, education and tourism opportunities
6. Strong community feeling

### Challenges

1. Need to be more inclusive of all member of the community
2. Need to recognize the needs of residents, especially the elderly, low-income families and those who do not speak English
3. Lack of public facilities such as a community center and a library as well as space for community services
4. Vacant and dilapidated buildings need to be renovated
5. Inappropriate new construction that do not contribute to the district
6. Alleys need to be cleaned up
7. Vacant lots need to be utilized
8. Public safety needs to be improved including 911 response time, drug use, violent crime and traffic safety

### Strategies

1. Decisions should involve a multicultural group representing various interests in the district
2. Construct new public amenities and facilities
3. Streetscape improvements such as trees, green spaces and children's art
4. Improve mobility for the disabled
5. Renovate dilapidated buildings
6. Sanitation improvements in alleys
7. Public safety improvements such as increased police presence
8. Trash cans and recycle bins to decrease littering
9. Reduce alcohol problems by creating regional alcohol impact area

### Perceptions of the District

1. A lack of recognition of diverse assets in the District
2. Lack of consistency in the name of the District creates an ambiguous impression.

There is also a need for affordable office space for community services and meeting spaces. Staff members of IDHA would also like to see the renovation of vacant and partially vacant buildings. They said abandoned buildings are unsafe and aesthetically unpleasant and cause a chain reaction of deterioration in the community. They are especially interested in seeing the Rex Apartments and the Eastern Hotel renovated to create more affordable housing for those below 30% of the median income. New construction, such as the two new stadiums has not alleviated some of these infrastructure problems. Because they are modern buildings they do not fit well into the District. Their contribution to the community is minimal because they do not provide any space for the community to use and do not bring more business to the District. Alleys in the International District also need attention. They are too dark and dirty because garbage collection is too infrequent. They say garbage needs to be collected in the alleys more than once a week. They would also like vacant lots to be utilized for new construction and additional parking.

The staff of the IDHA would also like improvements in public safety in the district. This is especially true because of the large elderly population in the District. Language barriers create complications in making 911 calls for emergency services and there is a slow emergency response time to this neighborhood. The IDHA staff says that crime is especially a problem in Hing Hay Park. In addition, stadium crowds often behave disrespectfully in the District including littering. Traffic safety is also an issue in the District. There is a problem with people speeding through the District especially during rush hour. This is particularly true at the intersections of 5<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> Avenues and Jackson. Stop signs have not been effective in stopping accidents, and stoplights are required instead. As members of other groups have said, new development on the periphery of the District has increased traffic

and parking problems. The traffic safety issue is especially urgent because there are many pedestrians in this neighborhood.

### Strategies for Meeting Challenges

IDHA staff members had a number of suggestions for alleviating these problems in the District. They emphasized that any actions must be decided upon by a multicultural group of community members representing a wide cross section of the district. This includes decisions about programming and hiring in city and social service processes. They suggested the construction of new public amenities such as a public theater and a traditional temple. They also suggested planting more trees, increasing green spaces and children's art installations to improve the appearance of the street. Adding more welcoming signs on the periphery of the District would also help reinforce the sense of community at the street level. To aid in the mobility of the disabled, they would like to see curb cuts improved at corners. Dilapidated building would be renovated to provide more community space and housing. The IDHA staff would like to see improved dumpster and trash collection to improve the appearance of alleys and streets. To increase public safety they would like to see increased police presence and satellite stations to provide 24-hour access to emergency services. To alleviate the littering problem they would like to see more trashcans and recycle bins installed on the street. To alleviate alcohol-related crime they would like the District to be included in a regional alcohol impact area.

### Perceptions of the District

Two issues relating to the city's impression of the District were discussed in this focus group. They said that the rest of the city is more concerned with dealing with problems in the District without trying to build on the asset of the diverse people in the district. In order to counter these problems, they say that it is necessary to create relationships between people to create community. Another issue discussed was the name of the District. They say that the lack of consistency in the naming of the District makes an ambiguous impression on the rest of the city.

## Little Saigon Business Association

- Most members are shop owners
- Serves businesses in the 12<sup>th</sup> and Jackson area

The Little Saigon Business Association is composed mostly of shop owners in the Little Saigon area around 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Jackson Street. It has 40 members who mostly live outside of the International District. Students interviewed members of the association on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2002.

### Strengths & Assets

Members of the Little Saigon Business Association said that this community is well developed. Everyone in the neighborhood knows each other and there is a great deal of mutual respect. The neighborhood has developed businesses and created job opportunities that help the development of the city of Seattle. It has "enlivened the area by moving drugies and prostitutes". Vietnamese businesses continue to expand towards Martin Luther King Way. The District is the hub for Vietnamese people in the Northwest. They feel that Little Saigon is like home. There is not the same kind of community for Vietnamese people elsewhere in the Northwest and as a result it attracts people from the entire region. Part of the reason this area has developed a unique identity is because I-5 acts as a "line of distinction." It serves as a physical boundary, but not a barrier. The members of the Little Saigon Business Association say that it is important that the District is broken down into sub-districts such as Little Saigon and Chinatown. They consider themselves part of the International District but acknowledge that Little Saigon has its own characteristics and businesses distinguishable from Chinatown.

### Weaknesses, Challenges & Problems

Members of the Little Saigon Business Association also detailed a number of challenges facing Little Saigon. There are several infrastructure issues to address in Little Saigon. Roads are not well maintained, and there are cracks along sidewalks and roads. There is a lack of street lighting in some areas. There are no street sweepers

## 2. Community Interviews

### Strengths & Assets

1. Strong sense of community
2. Business and job opportunities have been created
3. Hub for Vietnamese-American community in the Northwest
4. Attracts Vietnamese-Americans and others from around the region
5. I-5 serves to delineate Little Saigon giving it a distinct identity within the District.

### Challenges

1. Infrastructure problems such as poor street and sidewalk conditions
2. Lack of street lighting in some areas
3. Sanitation problems
4. Lack of open spaces, monuments and other amenities
5. Parking shortages
6. Metro free-ride zone does not extend to Little Saigon
7. Excessive regulations
8. Unequal distribution of benefits to this neighborhood

### Strategies

1. Create open spaces for gatherings
2. Change zoning to allow for more parking in front of businesses

### Perceptions of the District

1. Lack of recognition of Little Saigon's contributions to Seattle
2. Perceived as unclean and unsafe
3. Often seen as being separate from the District

### Communicating Positive Image

1. Little Saigon should be a place to learn about and experience Vietnamese culture
2. Want to avoid becoming a tourist attraction
3. Install public art to exemplify Vietnamese culture

working in the District. There is a lack of green spaces and open, communal spaces. This means that there is no place to hold festivals. Having these spaces would be advantageous because it would give people somewhere to eat take-out food. There is also a lack of monuments in the District. In particular, there is a lack of landmarks letting people know they are in Little Saigon. As with the rest of the District a shortage of parking is a problem. There are no signs or meters for parking. Parking problems are made worse by the fact that the Metro free ride zone stops before Little Saigon, discouraging people from using bus. Additionally, stadium spectators occupy spaces that would otherwise be used by customers. Business Association members say that there are too many regulations but despite these restrictions, shop owners in Little Saigon do not receive the same benefits that Chinatown does. Taxes have been increased three times in one year. Little Saigon is taxed as if it were downtown. Shop owners feel that the neighborhood is not getting as much resources from the city as some other neighborhoods. They pay taxes but say they are not getting the benefits they deserve.

### Strategies for Meeting Challenges

Little Saigon Business Association members suggest creating an open space where people can gather. One possible location would be near Yesler Terrace. To counter parking problems business owners in this area favor zoning which allows for setting shops back from the street and creating parking in front. This will help attract more customers to the area.

### Perceptions of Little Saigon

People in Little Saigon pride themselves on making Seattle a better place by displacing prostitution and drug activity. They feel that the area has not received recognition for this, however. They would like people in the area to be seen as people that contribute to the city. The area is not relying on help from the city, but they mutually benefit each other. They feel that they lack clout with the city and that the city takes care of other neighborhoods first. Business Association members believe some people do not come to the District because of the perception that it is not clean, well lit or safe. Lastly, they say that there is a perception that

Little Saigon is not part of the District. This is responsible for some of the weaknesses discussed above such as the different tax structure.

### **Communicating Positive Messages about Little Saigon**

Members of the Little Saigon Business Association would like Little Saigon to be a place where visitors can come and learn and experience Vietnamese culture. But unlike others in the District, they want to avoid Little Saigon turning into a tourist attraction. They would like to install some public art as well as flags and signs that would exemplify Vietnamese culture. The most important place to put these items would be at 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Jackson street which is perceived as the center of Little Saigon. They would also like to install a freeway exit sign that tells visitors they are entering Little Saigon. Another way of letting people experience Vietnamese culture more fully would be to hold a festival in the area. Most importantly they want people to know this is a friendly, giving neighborhood.

## **Wing Luke Asian Museum**

University of Washington Landscape Architecture faculty and students met with staff members of the Wing Luke museum on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2002. The museum was founded in 1967 and named in honor of Wing Luke, the first Chinese American elected to public office in the Northwest. It is devoted to promoting awareness of Asian Pacific American history and culture. It originally was housed in a small storefront in the Chinatown-International District.

### **Strengths & Assets**

#### History and Culture

Wing Luke staff members discussed a number of unique assets of the Chinatown-International District. They echoed one sentiment that was heard around the District. That is the history and cultures found in the area. Although Asian Americans are found in all areas of the city, none has the significance of this community. This neighborhood was an entry point for people moving to the United States from Asia. Even as these people move on to other areas, them and their descendants look at this community as their roots in the United States. They consider this their “ancestral home” to which there is an extraordinary connection.

As one staff member said, he can point to his own personal history here. He can see the actual building his grandfather was born in. Unlike other parts of town, much of the District still looks somewhat like it did in the early 1900s. In the century that the International District has existed it has become richer in its historical and cultural complexity. As different groups have emigrated from Asia, different communities have formed in the District. These include areas like Chinatown, Nihonmachi (Japanese), Little Manila (Filipino) or Little Saigon (Vietnamese). As well as having their own identities these communities come together to form the District. This diversity keeps growing in the new millennium.

## 2. Community Interviews

<b>Strengths &amp; Assets</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. History and Culture of Asian-American communities</li><li>2. Sense of Community</li><li>3. Landmarks in the District</li></ol>
<b>Challenges</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Gentrification</li><li>2. Public Safety</li><li>3. Political Clout with local government</li></ol>
<b>Strategies</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Plan to deal with new development</li><li>2. Renovate buildings for low income housing</li><li>3. Increase parking facilities in the District</li><li>4. Encourage non-automobile forms of transportation</li><li>5. Address the social needs of the youth and the elderly in the District</li></ol>
<b>Communicating Positive Image</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Implement safety plan to reduce crime rate</li><li>2. Implement marketing plan to attract tourists and other visitors</li><li>3. Build partnerships in the community to attract visitors</li></ol>

### Sense of Community

Wing Luke staff members pointed out that for such a small community, the District has a large number of agencies serving the community. These include the agencies that were interviewed for this report, as well as youth organizations and organizations for the elderly. As one member said “there are so many really wonderful people that really have a strong commitment to the neighborhood, to the preservation of this neighborhood to the development of this neighborhood that everyone I know down here has some real important role in that job”.

As another person pointed out everyone here has a strong desire to see the character of this neighborhood maintained.

### Important Places in the District

One of the aspects of the District that gives it character and sense of community is the many important landmarks and gathering places in the District. Among the places mentioned were cultural institutions such as the Nippon Kan Theater and the Wing Luke Museum. They also mentioned community centers and housing such as the Bush Hotel, the Eastern Hotel and the NP Hotel. These hotels are important because they have been standing since the early 1900s as well. Another important set of institutions is the many businesses in the area. Important open spaces in the District are the Danny Woo Community Gardens, the International Children’s Park and Kobe Terrace Park. As one staff member said, Kobe Terrace is particularly beautiful when the cherry blossoms are blooming. One place that has recently become an important gathering space is the Union Station Plaza.

### **Weaknesses, Challenges & Problems**

#### Gentrification

One of the greatest challenges to maintaining the identity of the District is the problem of gentrification according to Wing Luke staff members. Some of this has been driven by developments on the periphery of the District including new office buildings and the stadiums. This has caused an increase in property values. As a result some speculators are holding on to their buildings without improving them in order to sell later at a profit. The concern of Wing Luke staff members is that the character of the neighborhood could change. Because much of the development has happened on the Western periphery of the District, the focal point of activity has shifted there. The part of the neighborhood on the hill, however, has not been touched by new development. Wing Luke staff members worry that this part of the neighborhood will die out as result. They also worry that property owners will sell buildings to developers who do not have regard for the character of the neighborhood. They are not against all development, just uneven and inappropriate development.



### Public Safety

Another problem in the District is crime and public safety. As one member said the District is a “real center point for drug dealing, prostitution” as well as gang activity. This creates a perception that the District is an unsafe place. Also, in previous years there have been some high profile killings in the District. That hurts efforts to build community in the District. It makes people afraid to bring their families here and has caused some people to leave the neighborhood.

### Political Clout

To counter these challenges, the District needs to wield influence with the City of Seattle. One Wing Luke staff member, however, said that the District does not always get the consideration with government officials that other areas do, or that this consideration is inconsistent. As one said “...no matter how many meetings we attend, no matter how many studies are conducted that show the impact will negatively affect the neighborhood, they will still build the stadium next door, or they will build I-5 right through the neighborhood”.

### **Strategies for Meeting Challenges**

It is clear that the District has many needs. Members of the Wing Luke Museum made several proposals to address these issues. According to them the community needs to devise a plan to deal with new development on the periphery of the District as well as gentrification. If new buildings are built ways should be found to blend them into the ethnic, cultural and historic character of the neighborhood. Because new development is causing an increase in property values, decrepit buildings should be renovated and turned into low-income housing. Because new development is causing an increase in parking problems, one staff member proposed requiring all new developments to include community-parking facilities. Another way to deal with parking problems in the District is to build a two-story garage under I-5. This would double the parking capacity of the area under the freeway. It was also proposed that non-automobile forms of transportation be promoted in the District. This would include extending the trolley line up Jackson and improving pedestrian conditions. Pedestrian conditions could be improved by building walkways over some streets such as Jackson.

The District has other challenges than those associated with development. It has an aging population that needs more services. This includes creating new, safe places for them to gather. This would be a great improvement to their quality of life. Another population in the District needing attention is the children. There is a need for activities and programming for them as well.

### **Perceptions of the District**

As was mentioned before, Wing Luke staff members say the District suffers from a perception of being unsafe. This is because of the occurrence of violent crime that has been well publicized in the media. Attacking both the perception and the basis for this perception is essential to attracting new visitors and to enhancing the commercial climate of the District.

### **Communicating Positive Messages about the District**

Participants in this focus group said that the District needs a plan to attract visitors. To begin with, the District needs a safety plan to lower the crime rate. Once this has been accomplished, a marketing plan can be implemented to publicize features of the District that would be of interest to tourists and others. One strategy the museum has used to help encourage tourism is to implement a walking tour of the District. They installed plaques on historical buildings. They also installed an exhibit about the history of the District in front of the Wing Luke Museum. One of their goals is to publicize the multi-ethnic history of the neighborhood. They are also working with local businesses and restaurants to build a partnership to bring more people into the neighborhood.

## Analysis of Interview Findings

### 1. Street Livability

Problems concerning the street conditions in the District constitute a major category of concerns shared by residents and businesses alike. One major issue cited during the interviews is the problem of street safety in the neighborhood particularly after dark. Whether perceived or real, the condition contributes to a negative image of the District, which is reinforced by the presence of a transient population on the streets as well as the sight of vacant storefronts and the poor condition of many old buildings in the District.

In addition to the perception of crime, automobile traffic presents another major concern. For the elderly residents, the aggressive traffic through the District has made the neighborhood streets an unfriendly environment to walk and socialize. For businesses in core area of the District, an inadequate amount of parking spaces and traffic impacts from the nearby stadiums are cited as major problems. The physical condition of the streets also came up as a major issue. In the Little Saigon area, business owners cited the poor condition of the sidewalk and the lack of street amenities as evidence of the City's neglect for the neighborhood.

In the face of the above-mentioned issues, there is clearly a need for design proposals and policies that address the condition of the streets in terms of physical improvement, increased amenities and and traffic calming in selected locations in order to make the street environment more friendly and habitable to residents and visitors. The design of building façades is equally important to encourage more pedestrian activities and interactions on the streets. Because of the limited amount of open space in the District, street improvement could provide the additional benefit of serving as open space for social and pedestrian activities. On the other hand, increased pedestrian activities could also address the problem of crime in the neighborhood by providing more watchful eyes on the streets. By attracting more visitors and customers, it would also help support economic development and eliminate the negative image of the neighborhood.

### 2. Community and Place Identities

While virtually all those interviewed agreed about the rich historical and cultural heritage in the District, many also argued that the current physical environment in the District does not adequately express the cultural identities of the community. For example, the current effort by the Chinese community to erect traditional Chinese-style gates on King Street represents a strong desire to articulate and strengthen the identity of Chinatown in the District. In Little Saigon, business owners and community leaders also expressed a desire to have public art in the area that expresses the cultural identity of the Vietnamese community. The recent projects such as the Dragon Poles and the painted columns under the I-5 overpass represent efforts by the business community in the District to market and improve the image of the District using cultural symbols and icons.

While identity and the very name of the District remains a highly contested issue, it is clear that there is a shared desire to make the District more visually and physically reflective of its rich historic and cultural background. It is therefore important that any future urban design plan engages in an articulation and critical expression of the cultural and place identities in the District. Given the diverse interpretations present in the community, the design and planning process could provide opportunities for negotiating the collective meanings and individual expressions of identities in the District.

### 3. Balance Neighborhood and Development Needs

The responses from the interviews suggest a shared desire to promote economic development in the district. However, a conflict appears to exist in regard to the direction of housing development in the neighborhood. Some would like to see a significant increase of market-rate housing development. Only people with higher incomes would be able to afford market-rates. These residents would have more purchasing power and would benefit the local businesses. On the other hand, affordable housing advocates argue that the existing community needs to be protected and that more affordable housing is needed. They see gentrification as a threat to the livelihood of the area's long-time residents and businesses.

The apparent disagreement reflects the different visions for the neighborhood, as well as a conflict between the desire for economic development and keeping the District a livable neighborhood for its existing residents. However, regardless of the competing arguments, it is clear that housing is beneficial and critical to the local businesses and that the District will likely continue to serve as both a mixed-income residential neighborhood and a destination for tourists and visitors from other parts of the city. It is therefore important that the current urban design process pays attention to the potential conflicts and seeks balance in its approach toward meeting the multiple needs.

#### **4. Open/Green Space**

Lack of open space is another major concern raised in the interviews. In addition, many interviewees express the need to make the District greener. The importance of open space is demonstrated in the responses gathered on places recognized by the community as “sacred.” When asked to identify places that are important to the identity and community life in the district, Hing Hay Park and Danny Woo Garden were two of the most frequently mentioned places.

In identifying opportunities for creating more open spaces in the District, it is important to look at the roles of open space and patterns of activities in the District. Because the land resource is scarce in the District, it is particularly important for an urban design plan to make the existing open spaces more accessible to residents and visitors. Open space should also improve the functions and conditions of the existing streetscape so that it would supplement the limited open spaces in the District.

#### **5. Development Guidelines**

Lastly, the problems concerning the impact of recent development were frequently brought up in the interviews. One often mentioned issue is the lack of character of the recent development projects (office, retail and housing), particularly the lack of reference and conformity to the historical and cultural character of the neighborhood. In addition, by often violating the pre-existing spatial patterns such as that of storefronts, alleyways and street grids, many of the new developments were said to have adversely impacted the pedestrian environment and the social and retail activities on the streets. In response to these

problems, many community members have expressed a strong desire to establish a design guideline for future development in the district. It was argued that the current design review criteria under the Special Review Board were too general to influence the design of new buildings in the District.

However, as a design guideline begins to be developed under the current planning process, it is also important to note the negative sentiment among many community members and business owners toward excessive restrictions. It is important that the new guideline avoids the perception of hindering the development and renovation process. Rather, it is important for the guideline to convey the benefit to the District as whole in preserving its character and promoting a friendlier street environment that would ultimately benefit businesses and residents alike.

## 2. Community Interviews