

# **Residents' Survey**

**Old Town Chinatown**

**Portland's Caring Community  
at [PDXcaringCommunity.com](http://PDXcaringCommunity.com)**

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## Preface

As a data scientist, I have been curious about my Old Town Chinatown neighborhood ever since moving into an affordable apartment here in May 2015. I wondered: What was the neighborhood all about? Did anyone live here? Who were my neighbors? I could see the “Old Town” aspect clearly, but the Chinatown Japantown part was clearly finished as far as residents were concerned.

In 2017, the Portland Housing Bureau announced a public event regarding a **300-bed low-barrier shelter** it planned to develop on NW 3<sup>rd</sup> Av and Hoyt St near the North Gate of our neighborhood’s Historic District. The event was held to mansplain homeless shelters to us, rather than to provide a forum for public input. This is where I was **introduced to one of the ways my neighbors are routinely handled here in Portland.**

My neighbors and I had the same questions: How will the new shelter affect crime in the area? How will the shelter affect property values and rents? Don’t we already have enough shelters? Is this the best location to put 300 vulnerable people? As it turned out, the Housing Bureau couldn’t answer these questions and others, because it hadn’t done its due diligence.

It was fortunate (for me and residents) that I connected with my neighbor and videographer/marketer Ruth Ann Barrett – a tireless neighborhood activist and sustainability advocate. Combining Ruth Ann’s knowledge of the neighborhood with my data-crunching background, and adding a couple intense months’ data compilation and research work, we collaborated to publish [The Caring Community and Its Housing Landscape: A Guide to Housing in Old Town Chinatown, Portland, Oregon](#) (January, 2018).

The guide revealed that Old Town Chinatown, our neighborhood, is in fact a caring and compassionate community dedicated to providing shelter, housing and services for vulnerable people. It always has been. Ruth Ann and I established **Portland’s Caring Community** at [PDXcaringCommunity.com](#) – a web site with Ruth Ann’s [Ripples Blog](#) on community-related topics that hosted the Residents’ Survey.

While researching the report and attending community meetings, it quickly became apparent that **decision-makers did not have reliable metrics and were basing decisions on prejudice rather than facts.** We learned that getting our hands on data from City Bureaus was often impossible – frequently because the data wasn’t collected in the first place. For example, groups who perpetuate or are victims of crimes cannot be determined, because police do not track demographics. City Bureaus are often information silos that don’t talk to each other or know what information and data that they possess.

Additional accomplished and passionate neighborhood residents have joined us. We are determined to give all of us a voice that is heard and respected, to ensure that decisions are fact-based and inclusive, and that we residents have real power over what happens in Old Town Chinatown.

## The Survey

In Portland’s Old Town Chinatown, “**Block 25**” refers to a block at the foot of the Steel Bridge, bounded by NW Glisan St, NW 4<sup>th</sup> Av, NW 3<sup>rd</sup> Av and Flanders St – which currently contains the Old Blanchet House, together with a NW Natural parking lot which will be available after the utility moves out of the neighborhood. Prosper Portland (the city’s development commission) is in charge of site development, which is in the planning stages.

Initially, neighborhood residents weren’t considered to be stakeholders in Block 25 discussions, being lumped in with “Other” interested parties. Communities considered most important for Old Town

Chinatown decisions are the absentee Chinese community and the business community. Little is known about local residents and employees, who are most affected by changes in the neighborhood on a day-to-day basis.

The online survey, for Old Town Chinatown residents only, consists of two demographic questions regarding residency, and three questions regarding building height, land use and housing on Block 25. Residents were required to answer these questions.

Most respondents continued with the optional questions in the survey, answering questions on meal preparation, a matrix on food shopping preferences, a question on shopping habits, and a matrix on preferences for neighborhood-serving retail.

The survey was published on November 15, 2018 and was open through January 20, 2019. It was publicized on social media and notices posted in residential buildings. Postcards promoting the survey were also distributed, and residents without internet access were given a written option. 54 residents responded – 1.6% of our neighborhood’s residents.

That sounds great. Problem is, 44 of the respondents live in affordable housing – a 6% response rate for affordable housing residents. Three live in supportive housing. Seven are in market housing. As a consequence, survey results cannot be interpreted as reflecting the opinions of the general resident community.

For this reason, I [Katherine B Fischer], spent several weeks between December 26th and January 19<sup>th</sup> interviewing residents to put the results into context. These interviews were far more informative than the survey ever could have been, since they addressed the “why” of responses from the point of view of the residents themselves. The words in this report paraphrase the viewpoints given by residents.

Those living in market housing don’t spend much time in the neighborhood. They prefer to get into their cars and to do their shopping in stores and warehouses outside the City Center. They are not very concerned about what happens on Block 25.

Those in supportive housing are overwhelmed with daily life, and would have preferred an incentive for completing the survey. These residents, based on long experience, doubt that anything would come of their participation. Nobody cares. Trust must be earned.

Those in affordable housing very much want to be engaged in the community and have their voices heard – especially regarding the neighborhood grocery they have long advocated for.

These are generalizations, of course. Due to the engagement, caring, and passion of affordable housing residents as stakeholders, the **first-person “we”** used in this report mostly refers to residents in affordable housing.

## Terminology

Housing terminology can mean different things in different contexts. These are the definitions of the following terms for purposes of this report.

**Subsidized housing** – Housing developed with any kind of government support or incentives for the developer or operator, such as bonds, tax abatements, tax breaks, low-interest loans, etc. Practically all housing in Old Town Chinatown has been subsidized in some way.

**Supportive housing** – Affordable housing that is integrated with direct social services and made available to residents enrolled in health and social service programs. In Old Town Chinatown, Central City Concern operates the bulk of supportive housing buildings.

**Affordable housing** – Housing developed with government incentives that is affordable for people under certain income limits, some with age and disability restrictions.

**Public housing** - Housing provided for people with low incomes, the elderly and disabled, subsidized by public funds. Public Housing is operated in Portland by Home Forward, its housing authority.

## Executive Summary

Old Town Chinatown residents want:

“A safe, welcoming, residential community, conducive to sober living, with convenient neighborhood-serving businesses, and public, community, and cultural amenities.”

## What do we want on Block 25?

**Buildings no more than 17.4 stories tall** – We don’t want anything taller than the tallest building in our neighborhood – Pacific Tower. Our market residents would go as high as 25 floors, while our supportive housing residents would prefer 10-11 stories at the most.

**Residential buildings** - with a strong preference for affordable (80%) and market apartments (69%). Market residents oppose affordable housing (71%), while our supportive housing neighbors are fine all kinds of housing except market housing, which they strongly oppose.

**Street-level retail** – We almost unanimously agree that street-level retail should abound throughout and around Block 25. We do all or the great bulk of our shopping outside the neighborhood. We are hoping for smaller-scale shops that cater to us. Read further to learn about the stores we want.

**Morning to evening business hours** – We shop from the early morning to evening hours and want conveniently-located businesses that are open to serve us throughout the day.

The vast majority of us living south of Union Station walk or use public transit. We shop frequently for groceries and other necessities because we are limited to what we can carry. The survey shows that half of us leave Old Town Chinatown to do ALL of our shopping, while the other half sometimes, or rarely, shop in the neighborhood. The need to shop outside our neighborhood is an unnecessary burden for all of us, and exposes us to crime and mishaps along our shopping trajectories. We often do without after dark, rather than risk walking to Downtown or the Pearl. Last-minute purchases are out of the question, since a shopping expedition eats up at least 90 minutes of our time. The nearest food market, World Foods, is too expensive for many of us to use on a regular basis.

**A community/cultural center** – We want both in the same package – a multi-purpose center with performance, classroom, exercise, meeting and exhibition space.

## What kind of neighborhood do we want?

**A safe neighborhood** – A large portion of residents in our neighborhood are frail, physically disabled or encumbered, making us easy targets who are unable to run from an assailant. When we are intimidated, bullied, harassed, assaulted or robbed, it is unlikely that justice will be served.

**A welcoming neighborhood** – A welcoming neighborhood is a neighborhood designed with us in mind. It is a place where we feel welcome everywhere in the neighborhood, where no one shuns us as undesirables, or profiles us as potential criminals. It is a place where public spaces are accessible to all of us. It is a place where we can walk along the streets without fearing criminal activity.

**A residential neighborhood** – A residential neighborhood is a place where we know we belong and our community cares. Big office buildings and hotels attract outsiders who do not understand or even fear us.

**Buildings scaled to match existing buildings** – As a residential community, towering high rises are incompatible with a neighborhood like ours.

**A neighborhood conducive to sober living** – Those living in supportive housing abide by a lifestyle of sobriety. We all are willing to leave the neighborhood to buy our liquor. The easy availability of street drugs is an impediment to sober living. We appreciate efforts made by authorities to minimize drug dealing activity. The difference has been notable recently, thanks to authorities' hard work.

## What don't we want in our neighborhood?

**Towering high rises** – The blocks that Big Pink occupies were formerly part of our neighborhood. That's more than enough tallness nearby for us. We want this neighborhood to be a neighborhood, not a corporate headquarters or convention center.

**Offices and hotels** - Office buildings and hotels bring in people from outside the neighborhood who have no stake in our community. We feel unwelcome in and around buildings like these – like we don't belong here. Security guards are often posted to shoo us out and away, like dogs. This is our neighborhood. We live here. We want more neighbors like us who are engaged in the community - not condescending people who believe that their income makes them better than us, and wish we would disappear.

**Sex-oriented businesses** – These businesses bring the kind of people into our neighborhood who harass, intimidate and assault us – mostly young males, often inebriated. The businesses themselves are mostly located in dirty, run-down storefronts behind blocked windows with no visibility to the street. On the anonymity of the sidewalk, patrons outside these establishments are free to mess with us with impunity.

**Drugs** – The survey did not offer a retail option for street drugs. Nevertheless, residents unanimously agree that they want drug dealing OUT of the neighborhood. It brings crime, outsiders and shady characters into our midst.

**Liquor** – In supportive housing, we all are dedicated to living a sober lifestyle. Easy access to wine and liquor is incompatible with our goals.

## Businesses we want to see

Half of us leave Old Town Chinatown to do ALL of our shopping, while the other half sometimes or rarely shop in the neighborhood. These are the businesses we would most like to see:

- Deli / Bakery / Sandwiches / Hot/cold bar
- Grocery store / Fresh produce
- Pharmacy / Toiletries
- Thrift store
- Mailing/packing/post office
- Food court / Food trucks

## Businesses we don't want to see

- Wine / Liquor
- Tobacco / Vape shop
- Bill pay / Check cashing
- Professional offices
- Day spa / Day care

## Recommendations

Most of the following recommendations have been made in the past – see References for context.

- Limit the size and number of office buildings, hotels and such that cater exclusively to non-residents
- Limit the scale of development to a size compatible with the rest of the neighborhood
- Develop apartment housing, primarily affordable housing catering to an automobile-free lifestyle
- Improve pedestrian-friendly connectivity between Old Town Chinatown and adjacent areas including Downtown, the Pearl District and Waterfront Park to encourage pedestrian traffic
- Develop a cultural and community center for residents and visitors
- Design structures with ground floor retail to raise the level of activity on the streets, and improve security in the area
- Recruit merchant tenants to provide the essentials that residents need from morning through evening
- License sex-oriented businesses, implementing security, street appearance and public-facing standards. Work toward limiting these businesses to a distinct area of the neighborhood
- Train security and staff of sex-oriented businesses, hotels and office buildings to be welcoming to neighborhood residents and to intervene and to de-escalate incidents of harassment, intimidation, bullying and assault
- Locate liquor stores at least five blocks from Old Town Chinatown

## References

[North Old Town Chinatown Redevelopment Strategy](#); Prosper Portland, February 2008

[Improving the Entertainment Area of Old Town Chinatown](#); Office of Neighborhood Involvement, September 2013

[Old Town / Chinatown Five-Year Action Plan](#); Prosper Portland, July 2014

[Exhibit A: City of Portland CPTED Definition and Policy Strategies](#); Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, Portland City Code, date unknown

[A Guide to Housing in Old Town Chinatown, Portland, Oregon](#); Portland's Caring Community, January 2018