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Investing in Portland’s Future
Old Town/Chinatown Blocks 33/32

Introduction / Vision

In September 2003, the Portland Development Commission (PDC), working with the property owner and GBD Architects Incorporated (GBD), prepared a conceptual development study called the "Phase 1 Report" for the Goldsmith Blocks, also known as Old Town/Chinatown Blocks 32 and 33. These blocks are bounded by West Burnside, NW Fifth Avenue, NW Davis Street and NW Fourth Avenue and are included in the W Burnside / Couch Transportation and Urban Design Plan.

Since the completion of the 2003 study, the property has changed hands and the market environment for development in the Old Town/Chinatown District has improved due to existing, planned public improvements and new private investment in the neighborhood, including new facilities for the Portland Saturday Market, University of Oregon and MercyCorps. As a result, the current property owner has teamed with an experienced urban, mixed-use developer, Sockeye Development, LLC (Sockeye), to advance the previous conceptual architectural work and prepare a specific development program for the subject property.

PDC, Sockeye and the property owner are joining together to redevelop these underutilized parcels located within the Old Town/Chinatown Historic District of Portland’s Central City. GBD is currently preparing an updated Development Plan to function as a road map for the design and programming of the area.

This is a summary of that Development Plan which incorporates two Central City blocks.

Development Principles / Plan Goals

This development will capitalize on the proposed West Burnside / Couch Couplet and Streetcar. The development adjacent the Chinatown gate will also enliven and change the existing identity of Burnside. In order for this catalytic project to become viable, it will seek to leverage private investment and public funds to revitalize this neighborhood and spur future developments in the surrounding neighborhood. While doing so, the project would help to bridge the divide between Portland’s Downtown Core and areas north of Burnside. The project will likely be built in two phases: Block 33 first, followed by Block 32.

Neighborhood History

In the late 1800’s, and in the first half of the 20th century, the New Chinatown / Japantown Historic District composed the central city and is home to the oldest remaining architecture of the city.

This neighborhood has witnessed a history of community revitalization efforts, each of which has achieved important results. These include the creation of the Skidmore/Old Town Historic District in 1975, coupled with the subsequent adoption of a development plan for the historic district in 1976. A Chinatown Development Plan was adopted in 1984 and incorporated into the Old Town/Chinatown Development Plan in 1999. This district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989.

Old Town possesses a unique multi-cultural identity, including a rich heritage of Chinese, Japanese and Greek communities. Portland’s Saturday Market, a vibrant arts community and the Nightlife District combine to make it a dynamic hub of creative activity. These diverse aspects of Old Town/Chinatown will serve as a magnet for cultural tourism. Throughout the revitalization process, those who live and work in this historic area will join with the City to ensure the protection of the historic and cultural assets that make up the identity of the neighborhood.

Block 33

This block is proposed for development of a specialty Asian supermarket (Uwajimaya), along with mixed-income housing and parking.

Currently a surface grade parking, this full city block is unencumbered by historic buildings or current tenants. Due to this fact, the property owner and developer have moved forward quickly with a prospective development plan. Key elements are the inclusion of underground parking, an Uwajimaya Asian Supermarket that will front Fifth Avenue, Couch Street and Fourth Avenue, possible retail uses, and market rate and workforce housing above.

While plans for the residential component are still emerging, Sockeye currently plans to build on its experience with development of the Museum Place mixed-use project at S.W. 10th & Jefferson. Museum Place features a full-service Safeway with 140 mixed-income apartments above. Sockeye currently contemplates that a similar mixed-income housing approach in Old Town/Chinatown, perhaps with a mix of work force and market rate apartments, will suit this site.

A key feature of the residential component would be a courtyard level located on the second floor above Uwajimaya. This floor would include a landscaped courtyard featuring permanent sculptures and pedestals for installation of temporary works. Surrounding the courtyard would be a series of live/work units and small rental studio spaces accessible from the courtyard. These work spaces would have glass fronts on both the courtyard and street sides. There could also be several common use studios, perhaps one equipped with a kiln and pottery wheels and another one a photo lab.

Portland Development Commission loans for this proposed project could include assistance with:

- Asian supermarket tenant improvements
- Public parking to serve the needs of the surrounding neighborhood businesses
- Workforce housing

Block 32

Facing forward towards Burnside, the current five buildings on Block 32 include artist spaces, Class B office units, retail space, and the Grove Hotel, a single room occupancy residential building recently acquired by the Housing Authority of Portland. The Housing Authority will be upgrading the building’s fire and life safety condition for short term use until replacement housing is built.

Conceptually, the prospect of grouping these properties together will create the opportunity to create unified plan for redevelopment. Block 32 will be completed in a second phase to complement the development on Block 33, create improved frontage on Burnside and complete an additional parking.