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Tacoma's Lincoln District: Assessing and Improving Collaboration between City Government and the Vietnamese Business Community

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Tacoma's Lincoln District: Assessing and Improving Collaboration between City Government and the Vietnamese Business Community

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The Project

The purpose of this project aimed to take stock of existing collaboration between the City of Tacoma and the Vietnamese community, and further assess the relationship between urban planning and community engagement. Building a city requires more than just tall buildings and tourist destinations. The obligation is two fold; not only must the city cater to a future clientele for local investment, but it must also fulfill the needs of its existing residential members. Although people can usually agree on the importance of fulfilling these two obligations of the city, it often proves more difficult to agree on which obligation holds priority and should come first. When a city government agrees to sponsor a revitalization project, we must consider the following questions: who will take on the responsibility of which roles? What level of city intervention is actually appropriate and in which spaces? More importantly, we must ask if there are concrete strategies moving forward; what other actions can be done in order to ensure the continued development of this project? To address these concerns, I spent my time in various project sites where city members and community members habituated. I conducted both unstructured and semi-structured interviews of these two populations over the course of 10 weeks.

Initial Findings

I began doing some preliminary research in late March, when the LDRP project team had scheduled an open house at Lincoln High School with the objective to gather community members to learn more about the intentionality and purpose behind the Lincoln District Revitalization Project. From my initial attendance at the open house, it was clear that this project was a broader Tacoma community effort as various organizations were present to share on their part of how they were getting involved. Amongst those present included South Sound Transit, Tacoma Public Schools, Tacoma Public Utilities, Metroparks, Healthy Minds/Healthy Homes, and more. Food from a popular local Vietnamese restaurant, Vien Dong, was served to reflect the theme of highlighting Lincoln District as "a destination, not just another piece of real estate". From this open house alone, it felt as if the project's groundings were solid and the goals were clear.

However, when I returned to the second open house in mid June, (this time it took place in the newly opened project office located in the heart of the Lincoln District) there was significantly less energy and attendance than what I had observed in March. After speaking with the project committee members whom worked at the local project office, I concluded that there was a disparate gap in knowledge amongst all parties; it had appeared that community members and project committee members alike were uncertain about whether cultural preservation or urban planning efforts would take precedent. When my questions would inquire about anything beyond what was printed on a diagram or pamphlet, the project team would direct me towards the primary project lead, Debbie Bingham, or the project team's primary (and only) Vietnamese translator, My Nguyen, to answer on their behalf.

In Debbie's mind, the beneficiaries of the project would include more than the local Vietnamese community, embracing the larger Hispanic, Latino and/or Chicano, African-American, and white populations surrounding the area. According to this model of a revitalization project, by expanding and renovating the existing infrastructure, external community members and future visitors will find more reason to relocate and invest. Not only would the revitalization efforts make the space more aesthetically pleasing and inviting, but it would also invoke a sense of renewed energy to the current business owners, so that they themselves can begin to see why it is also in their own best interests to become a part of this larger project to revitalize Tacoma.

Horizons

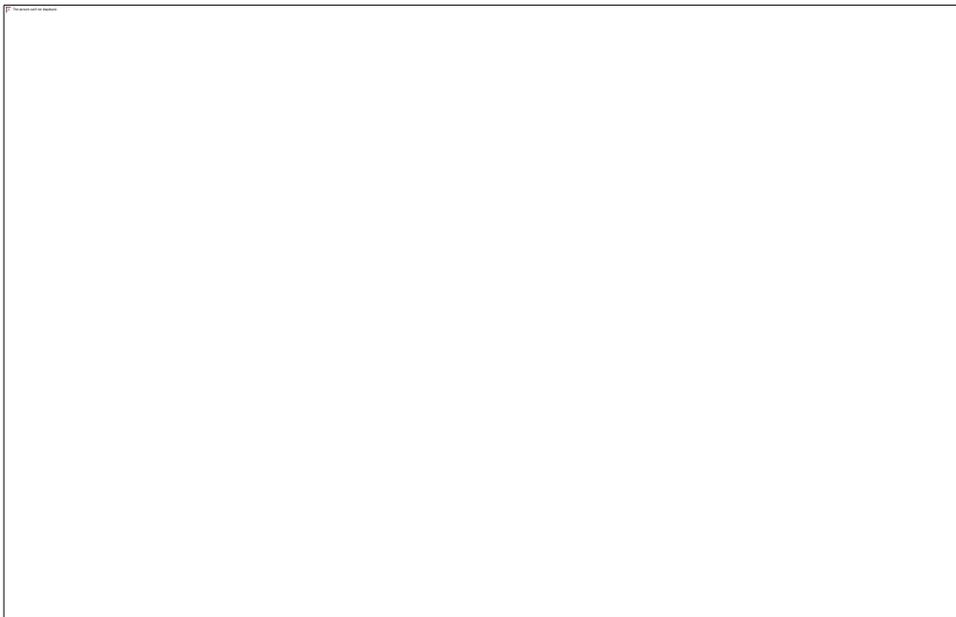
In order to investigate the workings of this revitalization project, including the potential for tension between "downtown" and "local" leadership centers, it is critical to talk about both cultural vitality as well as economic vitality. Cultural vitality is more than a couple installations of cloud gates and red poles; for the Vietnamese community residing in this district, they require long-term resources that can mediate language barriers and spaces to publicly and freely practice their traditions. Similarly, economic vitality is more than paved roadways and beautiful properties; true economic vitality ensures that not only opportunities are possible, but also that such opportunities should be tangible in creating an environment where a everyone feels empowered to be an entrepreneur.

On paper, the project rhetoric conveys a confidence that the two can go hand in hand, when historically they have not; especially if the community engagement pieces are lacking. From the insight I have gathered thus far, it appears the those working under the city feel undoubtedly confident about the project ability to revamp the neighborhood, while community members, especially that of the Vietnamese community, remain teetering on whether or not

this project alone will snowball into the success that the city hopes to see. There are strong underlying tensions that continue to curve effective communication and healthy debate.

The project office is impermanent, and its future occupancy remains uncertain after the project concludes. In its original statement, one of the project's focuses is on the language barriers within the Vietnamese community. However, the impermanence of the relationship between city and community leaders bring forth concerns over future accommodations for other language barriers that may exist within the other non-English speaking identities in the local community.

The importance of following the completion of this project, goes beyond that of Lincoln District community, as the city has clear intentions to model future neighborhood renovation projects after the Lincoln District Revitalization Project.



A visual of project plans for Lincoln District's new parking spaces and paved roadways.



A word cloud developed from a survey of what Lincoln District community members want to see from the revitalization project.

The project features a series of smaller projects in between that result in the total of a \$8 million budget. South 38th Street is planned to be completely redone, with all the utility poles being raised higher for future business expansion, allowing more light to brighten up the streets, and traffic limitations from timed street parking and the installation of more traffic signs. A mural has been created and curated from local Tacoma artist, Dionne Bonner, that is set to go in the center intersection between S 38th St. and S Yakima Ave; its installation is projected to begin Early August.