

Asian Americans oppose demolition plans for historic Chinatown building in Detroit



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For decades, a building at 3143 Cass Ave., near Peterboro Street in Detroit was a major center for Asian American communities and businesses, part of what was once a thriving Chinatown.

Built in 1883, it was home to the Chinese Merchants Association, hosting cultural events and a health clinic that helped immigrant families. Forty years ago, the Asian American group American Citizens for Justice, formed after the 1982 killing of Vincent Chin, gathered in the building to name their group and elect officers who led Asian Americans in civil rights struggles that drew national attention.

But now, the aging building with a dilapidated roof is in need of repairs and may be demolished by Olympia Development of Michigan, the Ilitch family organization's real estate firm. The possible demolition of one of the last sites of Chinatown has alarmed Asian American advocates in Michigan, who are asking the city of Detroit to halt the demolition for now and consider designating it a historical site worthy of preservation. Located just west of Woodward Avenue, it's part of the Cass Corridor area, which has seen increasing development.



"If it becomes a historical district, the building probably has sound bones on the outside, the exterior," said Roland Hwang, a Northville attorney who is president of American Citizens for Justice and worked to publicize the Chin case in the 1980s. "The roof has collapsed, but parts of it can be preserved, at least. And I think the exterior could be preserved, so that it serves as a reminder of our past, our legacy ... to preserve at least a reminder of the building and its existence."

Hwang's call is echoed by state Sen. Stephanie Chang, D-Detroit, the first Asian American woman elected to the Michigan Legislature. Chang, whose district includes the building, sent a letter Wednesday to David Bell, director of Detroit's Buildings, Safety, Engineering, and Environmental Department, asking for a pause to any plans for demolition of the building, noting its historic significance.

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"For many Asian Americans in and around the city of Detroit, this building represents where many of their relatives first placed their roots," Chang wrote.

"Located in the center of what is historically known as Chinatown, this property began as a residence in 1883 and was eventually purchased by the Chinese Merchants Association in 1963. ... served as a welcoming space for Chinese immigrants who decided to make Detroit home. Community gatherings, religious celebrations, and educational activities were hosted at this building as a way to unite residents."

Detroit has one of the lowest percentages of immigrants and Asian Americans among large cities in the U.S. It has struggled to attract foreign-born residents amid discussions about how the city can stem its declining population. Much of the region's Asian American population is now in the suburbs around Detroit, making up close to 30% of the residents in Troy and Novi. Some advocates said they are hoping to revive the former Chinatown in Detroit into a possible new Pan-Asian center with diverse businesses. Other cities, such as Seattle, have worked to preserve and develop their Chinatown areas that helped them grow, Hwang noted. Detroit should try to do the same, community leaders said.

Curtis Chin, an author and filmmaker whose family ran Chung's, a popular Chinese restaurant near the building that closed in 2000, said he understands the need for Detroit to develop, but said pausing the demolition for now could help prompt a discussion about the location's future.

"Halt it for a month or two," Chin told the Free Press. "What is wrong with pausing? Why such a mad rush right now?"

Let us have a "chance to have this conversation" before any action is taken, Chin suggested.



Chin has a new book to be released in October that includes his memories of the area around the building titled "Everything I Learned, I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant." He wrote and produced a 2009 documentary about the Chin case, "Vincent Who?"

He remembers his grandparents holding their 50th anniversary wedding celebrating in the Cass Avenue building, one of many memories local Asian Americans have. In addition to Chinese Americans, the area around the building had residents of Filipino, Indian and Afghani descent, Chin said.

Detroit City Councilwoman Gabriela Santiago-Romero has also been outspoken in calling for a pause of any demolition.

On Tuesday, the city council voted unanimously to halt any demolition of the historic building, but the city's top attorney said the council has no legal authority to block it.

"This morning, the law department issued its opinion, which confirmed that a council resolution expressing its wish that the demolition be delayed has no

legal force or effect and does not take precedent over the interests of public safety," Bell, the city's building director, said in a statement Wednesday.

Olympia Michigan did not return a message Thursday seeking comment. John Roach, a spokesman for Detroit, did not return an email seeking comment.

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It's unclear what the plans are for the site if the building were demolished. Some are concerned it will become just a parking lot. The Ilitches have been criticized by some over the years for building too many parking lots.

"I think we're talking about long-term preservation of a historic building, versus yet another bunch of asphalt, paving, or even just gravel," Hwang said.



Other community leaders have expressed support for halting demolition.

"I really hope that a conversation begins that will result in the celebration of this historic structure dating back to 1883, our Chinese community's history and our own special Chinatown," said Roy Freij, former Wayne County deputy treasurer and current director of community engagement with the Cultural Exchange Network of Detroit and SE Michigan, a group formed in the 1990s to help promote racial unity and the growth of Detroit. "Hopefully, this concern over the historic Chinatown hall can be an opportunity for folks to think creatively about a win-win scenario beneficial to all parties."

Rising Voices, an Asian American advocacy group in Detroit, issued [a statement](#) Wednesday asking for the building to be preserved.

"We call on the city to work with the developers and community members to preserve and explore options to restore the building back to its original function of providing a nurturing gathering place for the local community," Jasmine Rivera, co-executive director of Rising Voices, said.

Chang worries the razing of the building could hurt Detroit's attempts to grow its Asian American community.

"The destruction of this building will have a significant negative impact on this community and destroy what little remnants we have left of Detroit's old Chinatown," she wrote. "There have been numerous historic buildings around the city successfully repaired and renovated, and this building should be considered for such efforts."

City Hall reporter Dana Afana contributed to this report.

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