

Item 7, September 5, 2023  
Partial Demolition is Tantamount to Total Demolition

September 2, 2023

Dear Mayor Kou and Councilmembers:

It is vitally important to understand that the proposed partial demolition of the Thomas Foon Chew Cannery building is tantamount to total demolition. Approving the proposal before you on September 5, the demolition of about 40% of the building, will render the Cannery ineligible for historic protection, putting the entire building, including the monitor roofs in jeopardy for future generations. The legacy of an important figure in not only Palo Alto's history, but in the history of Santa Clara County and of Chinese history in California will be swept away with your "yes" vote.

Palo Alto Neighborhoods has a history of advocacy around this property and for the construction of housing there as well.

Back in 2019, PAN supported the colleagues memo proposed by Councilmembers Kou and DuBois to expedite the housing work plan, in particular measures to build affordable and BMR housing.

Even before the NVCAP process began, PAN advocated for sunseting the use of office/commercial at the Fry's/Cannery site, as prescribed by previous councils, so that the property could be redeveloped as housing, which Palo Alto desperately needs.

During the NVCAP process, PAN backed the bold Alternative M as put forth by Terry Holzemer, Keith Reckdahl and Becky Sanders. Alternative M would have given us hundreds of housing units, all while preserving the legacy of Thomas Foon Chew and enhancing North Ventura by providing homes for new neighbors in a livable, walkable environment.

Now that the EIR has reported that the demolition would be culturally destructive and would cost us one of the most major historic resources in our city, it's time to look for meaningful alternatives. You can in fact add the same amount of housing (or more) without any demolition of the Cannery. A number of ideas for that have not been formally explored. For example, instead of building a massive new two-story garage north of the Cannery, cars can be parked inside the portion of the Cannery that was to be demolished. This will free up space further from the train for new housing while saving the entire Cannery. It's more environmental -- and it preserves a historic resource.

Below you will find a link to an article about the history of the Cannery that appeared last week in the Chinese language news outlet *World Journal*.

PAN urges Council to work with the applicant and community to come up with a plan that preserves the cannery in its entirety.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sheri Furman  
Becky Sanders  
Co-Chairs, Palo Alto Neighborhoods

## Residents Seek to Salvage the Old Factory Building of the Chinese "Asparagus King" and Call for the Preservation of Historical Sites

Reporter Xu Beibei/Palo Alto Report 2023-08-31 14:28 ET

The city of Palo Alto will soon finalize plans for a redevelopment of a factory building at 340 Portage Ave. However, behind this factory building is the history and years of Thomas Foon Chew\*, a Chinese business tycoon in the Bay Area at the beginning of the last century. In the last century when the Chinese Exclusion Act was the most severe, Zhao Chan Yuan opened several factories in the Bay Area and owned the third largest canning factory in the United States at that time. He revolutionized asparagus canning technology and was known as the "King of Asparagus". He unfortunately died of pneumonia at the age of 41, and more than 25,000 people in Chinatown in San Francisco attended his funeral.

Terry Holzemer is a teacher in the Palo Alto School District. By chance, he read the book "Historic Bay Area Visionaries" by Robin Chapman, which records Zhao Chan Yuan's deeds. In the face of the city council's proposal to demolish the factory building and build 74 townhouses, he raised \$1,500 on a crowdfunding website and applied to list the factory building as a historic site, exempting it from demolition.

"It's important to know Thomas Foon Chew, and unfortunately history has all but forgotten him. He should be recognized for what he accomplished in an environment of unimaginable racial prejudice and discrimination," Holzemer said. "We often forget this point, if our next generation forgets where they came from, it will be a great loss to the whole society."

Karen Holman, the former mayor of Palo Alto, said, "It is very important to have a physical historical site that everyone can visit. People will deepen their understanding of history because of the real firsthand experience. People would say, oh, this is where that and such and such happened. It is very important to preserve the historical relics that are within reach. Especially considering that Zhao Chan Yuan's factory in Alviso is gone today."

At present, the old canning factory site has passed the preliminary review and meets the standards of the California Historic Site Registration, but it still needs to pass the hearing of the Historic Resources Board in Palo Alto on September 14.

On the 5th of next month, the Palo Alto City Council will discuss the development agreement between the city government and Sobrato, which currently owns the factory building. If approved, 40 percent of the factories would be demolished to make way for 74 townhouses. The remaining factory buildings will be refurbished for commercial use.

What worries Holzemer and Holman is that once the council approves the development agreement and 40 percent of the building is demolished, the old cannery building will no longer qualify as a historic site. So, they hope that more people can attend the city council meeting on September 5, or write to the council, expressing their wishes to preserve the old canning factory building as a historic site.

Monica Yeung Arima, director of the Palo Alto City Museum of History, said: "Asian American history is not well documented, not well taught to our next generation, or even part of classroom programs. And the rise of hate crimes against Asians reminds us of the importance of history education."

Yeung Wai Ping\*\* said, "The Asian community is growing, and it is of great significance to preserve a historical site that can resonate with the Asian community. This historical site tells us that since a long time ago, we belong here."

\*Chew's official English name is "Thomas Foon Chew," but his Chinese name is Zhao Chan Yuan.

\*\*"Yeung Wai Ping" is Monica Yeung Arima's Chinese name