



# CITY OF SAN MATEO

City Hall  
330 W. 20th Avenue  
San Mateo CA 94403  
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## Agenda Report

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**TO:** City Council  
**FROM:** Drew Corbett, City Manager  
**PREPARED BY:** City Manager's Office  
**MEETING DATE:** March 02, 2020

**SUBJECT:**  
Local Historic Markers in the Public Right-of-Way – Policy Approval

### RECOMMENDATION:

Adopt a Resolution to approve the proposed Council Policy on Local Historic Markers in the Public Right of Way, provide feedback on the preferred prototype design, and consider the City of San Mateo Parks and Recreation Foundation's proposal to commemorate Ching Lee Laundry.

### BACKGROUND:

The City has been approached with a proposal to install a marker commemorating the former Ching Lee Laundry in the public right-of-way at First Avenue and Claremont Street. While considering the recent proposal, staff determined the City does not have a clear process in place and requests City Council adopt a policy to formalize the process for approving historic markers in the public right of way.

### Proposed Policy

The City has an interest in acknowledging and commemorating San Mateo's culture and history by recognizing places of significant public interest. Historic marker programs are designed to be selective and based upon objective criteria, while still allowing a measure of flexibility. A local policy would provide guidelines to assist Council in deciding what markers are installed in the public right of way. Approved markers should generally be funded privately through donations; however, the Council may decide to commit public funds. Once installed, the markers would become property of the City and the City would be responsible for any maintenance.

The proposed historic marker policy covers markers in the public right of way, such as on streets or sidewalks. This policy does not affect art installations or markers in City parks, on City buildings, or on private property. Whenever feasible, those interested in commemorating a site of historical significance are encouraged to install a marker within the property being recognized and not within the public right of way. Markers affixed directly to a building are covered under the City's sign ordinance. The policy outlines an approval process, evaluation criteria, and a preferred design prototype for all markers proposed in the public right of way.

### Approval Process:

Individuals or organizations may apply to install a marker in the public right-of-way and will work with City staff to ensure it complies with Council policy. The Council would consider proposals during a public meeting before voting on whether to approve a marker in the public right of way.

### Evaluation Criteria:

Proposals must meet five qualifying criteria including:

- (1) The site is a place of public interest or represents a person or organization whose contributions were significant to

San Mateo's heritage.

- (2) The site is not currently marked and would likely not be eligible for the state or national registry.
- (3) The proposed marker is within the public right-of-way controlled by the City.
- (4) The marker is within public view and its placement conforms with the Americans with Disability Act standards.
- (5) The marker is privately funded or the Council is willing to commit public funds.

Regarding the first qualifying criteria, Council is asked to provide direction on whether to include requirements that recognition of an individual should be done posthumously.

#### Preferred Design and Location:

Council is asked to provide direction on whether to require markers be of a similar general size and design. As these markers would be located in the public right-of-way and become property of the City, safety and maintenance are important issues for consideration.

Staff has researched historic markers installations in other communities and has identified the following prototype options:

- (1) Installed: in-ground and flush with the street/sidewalk. Material: cast or etched metal
- (2) Installed: above ground in a standalone frame. Material: porcelain enamel on steel affixed in a metal frame
- (3) Installed: above ground affixed to a City-owned pole. Material: cast/etched metal or enamel on steel

Representative illustrations of these prototype options are included as Attachment 2 to this report. Staff recommends the in-ground option as the preferred prototype as it won't impact site distance for traffic, preserves existing pedestrian access, and is less likely to interfere with ADA compliance. In-ground markers are less likely to be struck or damaged by bicyclists or vehicles. The in-ground markers may require more time to install and tend to be slightly more costly to manufacture than the enamel on steel options; however, they are expected to be easier to maintain in the long term and less prone to graffiti. Staff estimates that the in-ground marker option will cost roughly \$3,500 to install.

Site conditions are expected to vary by proposal, and Council may at its discretion approve an alternative design or format. In general, the City encourages markers be installed within private property to minimize conflicts with the active use of public spaces.

#### Ching Lee Laundry Proposal

The City has been approached by Fred Hansson on behalf of the nonprofit Parks Foundation with a proposal to install a historic marker commemorating the former Ching Lee Laundry. The business opened in 1876 and was considered the oldest Chinese laundry in the United States when it closed in late 2016. The business and surrounding area served as an informal Chinatown and hub of the immigrant community before World War II. The business is considered a testament to Chinese immigrants overcoming alienation, poverty, segregation, discrimination, and bigotry to become Americans.

The proposal is to install a marker near the former laundry building at 420 First Avenue. Mr. Hansson has proposed an above-ground marker made of porcelain enamel on steel affixed to a standalone metal frame, which is in the style of second prototype option. As the future of the former laundry building is unclear, the proposal is to locate the marker across the street on the northwest corner of First Avenue and Claremont Street. The site overlooks the laundry building, and the proposal is to install the marker in a brick bulb-out area at the intersection in front of 461 First Avenue.

The foundation has raised approximately \$3,000 in private donations toward the Ching Lee Laundry marker. The proposal is to use a company that manufactures enamel on steel markers and has worked on installations in Golden Gate Park. The plaque would be 36 inches by 24 inches, with porcelain enamel printed on 16-gauge steel. The proposal includes about three paragraphs of text, and several images. A preliminary mock-up of the marker is included as Attachment 3 to this report. Mr. Hansson feels this design would provide a more comprehensive picture of the site's historical significance. These interpretive panel style markers are expected to be slightly less costly than the in-ground bronze casted plaques. Mr. Hansson has expressed a willingness to look at other nearby sites if needed for feasibility, but feels this area is ideal based on its proximity to the former laundry and downtown.

Staff have raised safety and maintenance concerns about the proposed location being at an intersection where an above-ground marker is more likely to interfere with site distance, pedestrian flow, and has a greater risk of being damaged by a turning vehicle. Staff is also concerned about the area having brick pavers and recommends markers be installed in a section of sidewalk or street that can be more easily cut and re-poured with concrete. An in-ground marker is also less likely to interfere with ADA compliance.

The Parks Foundation has expressed an interest in this marker being the first in a plan to create an “urban trail” as a way to connect the City’s numerous parks. Markers would be located along the route – primarily in parks – informing readers about some of the unique aspects of the area. The foundation has secured donations to fund the manufacturing cost of the Ching Lee Laundry marker and if approved, would use this as an example for future fundraising efforts.

#### Questions for Council Consideration

- Does the Council support adopting a policy governing Historic Markers in the Public Right-of-Way?
- Should the policy include that markers commemorating an individual only be made posthumously?
- Does Council have a preferred prototype to include in the policy?
- Does Council support the City taking on the responsibility to install and maintain these markers?
- Does the Council support a historic marker to commemorate the former site of the Ching Lee Laundry?
- Does Council wish to approve the proposed Ching Lee Laundry marker in its current design?

#### **BUDGET IMPACT:**

Policy adoption does not result in any specific budget impacts. Approval of a marker would not require the City to cover the cost of installation, estimated to be \$3,500 per marker, unless Council chose to commit public funds for this purpose. After installation, the City would be required to maintain the markers, which is not expected to have a significant fiscal impact.

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION:**

Adoption of the proposed policy is not a project subject to CEQA, because it is an administrative activity that will not impact the environment. Selection of a proposed prototype and approval of the proposed Ching Lee Laundry market installation are categorically exempt from CEQA as an “existing facility,” because it consists of a minor alteration to existing City right of way. (CEQA Guidelines Section 15301.)

#### **NOTICE PROVIDED**

All meeting noticing requirements were met.

#### **ATTACHMENTS**

Att 1 – Proposed Resolution

Att 2 – Prototype Design Options

Att 3 – Preliminary Ching Lee Laundry Marker Proposal

#### **STAFF CONTACT**

Samantha Weigel, Communications and Public Relations Analyst

sweigel@cityofsanmateo.org

(650) 522-7005