



DATE: March 19, 2025

TO: Recreation, Music & Parks Commission

FROM: Jonathan Luong, Senior Management Analyst, Community Development
Drew Halter, Director of Parks and Recreation

SUBJECT: Recreation, Music, and Parks Commission to Recommend the City Council
Consider Renaming Center Park to Historic Chinatown Park in Recognition of
Geographic Significance and Historical Contributions

RECOMMENDATION

Staff is seeking a recommendation from the Recreation, Music, and Parks Commission (RMPC) to request the City Council consider renaming Center Park, located at 7 Petaluma Boulevard North, to Historic Chinatown Park in recognition of the historical significance of Petaluma's early Chinese community and contributions to the city's cultural and economic development of the historic downtown.

BACKGROUND

The City of Petaluma, through Council Resolution No. 89-304 N.C.S, adopted formal guidelines and facilities naming policies and procedures to assist the City Council in exercising its final authority in naming all public facilities within its jurisdiction. While the naming of all public facilities remains solely the responsibility of the City Council, historically those facilities located in city parks or under the supervision of the Parks and Recreation department, have been preceded by soliciting public input and a formal recommendation by the Recreation, Music, and Parks Commission.

The City's adopted park naming policy and procedure provides the City Council, community, and staff with guidelines to determine when to bring forward recommendations to name or rename parks and/or facilities, as well as provide specific criteria for naming new facilities and parks through a public process.

The Facilities Naming Policy and Procedures (found as Attachment A to the staff report)

provides two objectives for the City Council to consider when exercising its authority in naming facilities. This includes:

1. To name public facilities so that they will be easily identified as to geographical location and/or function.
2. To encourage the dedication of land or funds for public use by individuals/groups, in recognition of their achievements or community contributions.

Specific criteria and guidance are provided when considering naming public facilities in recognition of service also including:

1. Recognizing individuals, groups, and organizations for important service contributions that have:
 - Had a recognized direct positive effect on the community
 - Contribution by a profit-making organization shall have been outside the normal function of the organization.

Center Park, located at 7 Petaluma Blvd North, was previously part of Lower Main Street Plaza, a key gathering space for Petaluma's commercial district in the years leading up to the City's formation in 1858. In the 1860s Lower Main Street served as an informal parking lot for farmers and patrons with horse-drawn wagons, providing merchants with areas to install hitching posts, a horse trough, and access to water and respite. The area of Lower Main Street, extending from Western Avenue down Main and Third Streets to D Street primarily housed Chinese businesses, merchants, and residences before anti-Chinese sentiment led to their forced relocation.¹

During the late 19th century, Petaluma's Chinatown was a vibrant ethnic enclave along what is now Petaluma Boulevard North, extending from Western Avenue to D Street. Chinese immigrants contributed to the local economy as laborers, merchants, and entrepreneurs, operating laundries, groceries, boarding houses, and restaurants as the city experienced some of its greatest growth.²

Main Street Plaza was officially renamed Center Park in 1925 following beautification efforts initiated in 1921, to recognize the site as a central community gathering space for citywide events including a notable Petaluma's Egg Day Celebration in 1921. The newly beautified Lower Main Street Plaza was officially named "Center Park," signifying the plaza's location between Walnut Park and Hill Plaza Park, which has been renamed Penry Park.¹

Despite the significant contributions to the economic and cultural development of the downtown area, the Chinese community in Petaluma faced discrimination, exclusionary laws, and forced displacements following the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and other anti-Chinese policies. By the early 20th century, the original Chinatown had largely disappeared, but the legacy of Chinese workers remains embedded in the city's development, including contributions to agriculture, brick making, river dredging, and railroads that define the downtown area and riverfront.²

Given its location and historical relevance, renaming Center Park to the Historic Chinatown Park would serve as an acknowledgment of the significant contributions and the struggles of Petaluma’s early Chinese community while supporting the City's commitment to inclusive historical recognition.

¹ Sheehy, J. (2024, September 24). *The History of Center Park*. Petaluma Historian. <https://petalumahistorian.com/the-history-of-center-park/>.

² Sheehy, J. P. (2023, November 1). *In the Shadow of Gold Mountain: Petaluma’s Early Chinatown*. *Petaluma Argus-Courier*. <https://www.petaluma360.com/article/news/in-the-shadow-of-gold-mountain-petalumas-early-chinatown/>.

DISCUSSION

The responsibility of the Recreation, Music, and Parks Commissioners in supporting a park or facility naming effort is to review and make recommendations on the naming of a City park or recreational facility by applying established criteria for the proposed name under consideration and forwarding the Commission’s recommendation to City Council for discussion and formal action.

The Historic Chinatown Park Ad Hoc Committee is a grassroots initiative comprised of Asian American Pacific Islander scholars, genealogists, artists, healers, storytellers, and residents from Petaluma and the San Francisco North Bay Area. In collaboration with the Petaluma Historical Library & Museum and the City of Petaluma, the Committee initiated efforts to rename Center Park to recognize the historical contributions of Chinese residents in the community.

As part of this effort, the Committee developed the Petaluma Unearthed: Facing the Past for a Better Future initiative, aimed at educating the public on Petaluma’s Chinese history through a historical exhibit, community programming, and public outreach initiatives.

Based on the established criteria provided in the public facilities naming policy, the contributions to historical accuracy by the Historic Chinatown Park Ad Hoc Committee, and in consideration of the location, and significant positive impact and contributions of the Chinese Community, staff recommends that Center Park be renamed the Historic Chinatown Park.

In accordance with the City of Petaluma’s park naming policy, staff are requesting the RMPC review the established criteria, determine alignment with stated policy objectives, and make a recommendation to City Council for consideration and adoption.

CITYWIDE GOALS & PRIORITIES

Spaces & Places That Inspire: Create inviting natural and built places and spaces for contemplation, play, arts, and connection while celebrating our history and encouraging community pride

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A - City of Petaluma Parks & Recreation - Facilities Naming Policy and Procedure
Attachment B - A Guide to Old Petaluma Chinatown