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Today's Newsday

Scarcity Of Jobs, Housing Threatening Chinatown

By S. Mitra Kalita
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More than a year after the Sept. 11 attacks, a new study presents a bleak assessment of Chinatown and says its existence is threatened by a lack of jobs and affordable housing.

The unemployment rate was 12 percent among those surveyed in the area, almost double the city average, according to the Rebuild Chinatown Initiative, a coalition of community groups.

The coalition interviewed more than 2,000 people who live in, work in or visit the neighborhood. The Asian Americans for Equality spearheaded the effort and played host to a conference yesterday that discussed the report's findings.

"Unemployment is much higher among people who said they had manufacturing skills as opposed to food service," said Moustafa Mourad, the planner who developed and presented the study. "There is an employment problem and the employment problem is in manufacturing, particularly the garment sector."

Chinatown's garment industry continues to reel, leading to "dangerous levels" of unemployment, said Teddy Lai, executive director of the Greater Blouse, Skirt and Undergarment Association, which represents garment makers. Before the Sept. 11 attacks, 246 factories employed 12,000 workers; now, 137 factories employ 7,000.

More than a third of respondents said they were looking for a job; experts said that suggests underemployment or dissatisfaction with current jobs.

The September unemployment rate in New York City was 7.1 percent, according to the Department of Labor. State labor market analyst James Brown said the figure varies widely by area. "It's often double digits in neighborhoods with high immigration," he said. Chinatown "also depends a lot on tourism,

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which has been somewhat weaker."

Yesterday's conference attracted scholars, urban planners, city officials, civic groups and small business owners. A representative from the Bloomberg administration said the mayor supports Chinatown's designation both as a business improvement district and an Empire Zone, which would enable businesses to qualify for city and state tax credits and benefits.

The survey found that the community most dislikes its odor, noise, lack of affordable housing, parking and traffic. As he heard the survey's findings, David Chen couldn't help but chuckle. Twenty-five years ago, he was a graduate student surveying Chinatown residents. "We had the same findings," said Chen, now executive director of the Chinese-American Planning Council. Like him, many gathered in the crowd of 200 said the survey raised more questions than it answered, namely: "What's next?"

Some encouraged leaders to think more globally.

"There's an opportunity to rebrand Chinatown," said Kathryn Wylde, president of the New York City Partnership & Chamber of Commerce, citing trade opportunities with Asia. "I think your ambitions can be broader and bigger."

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