

COALITION FOR A BETTER CHINESE AMERICAN COMMUNITY

華埠更好團結聯盟

SOLIDARITY

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE ILLINOIS SENATE REDISTRICTING COMMITTEE
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Submitted by:
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My name is Theresa Mah. I live in the McKinley Park neighborhood of Chicago and I work with Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community. CBCAC has been around for 10 years now, having formed a decade ago to spearhead the effort to keep the Chinese population within the boundaries of a single district during the last remapping process. Despite our best efforts, that process ended disappointingly for us: after all was said and done, more than 20,000 Chinese residents were divided between four city wards, four state house districts, three state senate districts and three congressional districts. Our community was fragmented and our votes diluted so that despite a 60% growth in population since the 1990 census, our voting rights were greatly diminished.

This time around, we are determined make our strongest possible case for change. We have worked hard and have doggedly made our case to everyone who would listen. We have coordinated with and consulted with the Asian American Institute, community leaders and multi-ethnic coalitions in the surrounding minority communities. We have been chomping at the bit to have this opportunity again after ten long years. And in the decade that has passed, our community has grown yet again. In contrast to the overall population loss sustained by both the city and state, the Asian population in Armour Square Chinatown and the surrounding neighborhoods has increased by 55% to just over 31,000. The neighborhood areas that sustained this growth include the South Loop, Douglas, Armour Square, Bridgeport, McKinley Park, and Brighton Park. It is from this concentration that we have identified the community area that we would like to see kept intact during the current redistricting process.

This is an area that we are designating as the "Greater Chinatown Community Area." What I am here to present today is a description of this community to demonstrate how it is a unique and cohesive community. The Greater Chinatown Community Area as we define it is bounded by the Chicago River and Stevenson Expressway on the north, California to the west, Pershing for the most part on the south, and Michigan and Indiana Avenues to the East up to Polk Street at its very northern tip. We have included a map of this community area for your reference and for the

public record. (See Appendix A) As you can see from the second set of accompanying maps, the concentration of the Chinese population, represented by the areas shaded in red, has increased tremendously since 2000. (See appendix B) The two maps side by side also show the direction of growth. Not only is there increasing density in the Armour Square and Bridgeport neighborhoods, there is also movement towards the southern boundary of Bridgeport and Fuller Park, westward into McKinley Park and Brighton Park, and north and east into the South Loop and Douglas neighborhood areas.

This is a community of interest that can be defined as either a crossover, coalition, or influence district according to the recently enacted Illinois Voting Rights Act of 2011, which received unanimous support in November 2010 from this very committee and for which we are very grateful.

Within the boundaries of this Greater Chinatown Community Area, there is a total population of 89,623 residents, of which 30% are Asian. In this particular area, the vast majority of the residents classified as "Asian" through the census are in fact Chinese American; however there are also other Asian ethnic groups residing in this area, and of course Chinese Americans share many commonalities with the larger group of Asian Americans.

At every corner of this Greater Chinatown Community Area, there are demographic and institutional anchors that give credence to our characterization of this area as a cohesive community. At the center of it are the dense commercial areas and social service institutions located in what most people associate with Chicago's Southside Chinatown, or Armour Square-Chinatown. With Chinatown Square along Archer Avenue and the Wentworth Avenue commercial district, the area is always bustling with people, and the social service agencies like the Chinese American Service League and Pui Tak Center attract clients from every part of the Community Area.

At the southwestern tip we find Kelly High School, which may have the largest Chinese student population of all the high schools in the Chicago Public School system. Because Chinatown does not have its own neighborhood high school, many families have either moved to this neighborhood so that their children can be closer to the school, or rely on the Archer Avenue bus to transport them from the other end of the community area.

Also near the southwestern portion of the community area, one finds McKinley Park, a lovely, well-used park with a lagoon, skating rink, and field house. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that significant numbers of Chinese families have moved into the neighborhood surrounding the park. Dozens of Chinese seniors gather daily at this park to socialize and exercise. They live with their families in the nearby single-family homes; many can be found in the summertime tending their gardens filled with Chinese vegetables like long beans, bok choy, and snow peas. Each morning, as I travel to work on the Archer Avenue bus, which traverses the length of the community area along the Archer Avenue corridor, I am surrounded other Asian faces and chatter in several Chinese dialects. Based on casual observation, I would venture that Asians often make up about 80% of the morning rush hour passengers on this bus line from Kedzie going east to the Red line stop at Wentworth Avenue.

Apart from the commonality in racial and ethnic background, this is also a community with much in common in terms of their need for culturally and linguistically sensitive social services. A sampling of 18,000 residents from this area who speak an Asian language found that about half characterized their ability to speak English as “not well” or “not at all.” Given this situation, the ability to effectively advocate for their needs becomes especially challenging. I have witnessed such difficulties first hand on more than one occasion when my colleagues at the Chinese American Service League attempt to enlist their clients in efforts to contact their legislators in order to preserve funding for programs or services that are critical to them. It is in such instances that it would be helpful to have a single elected official to contact rather than have the clients endure the confusion of determining which one of four districts they live in and having to explain their request to a legislator who may not feel particularly accountable to our community.

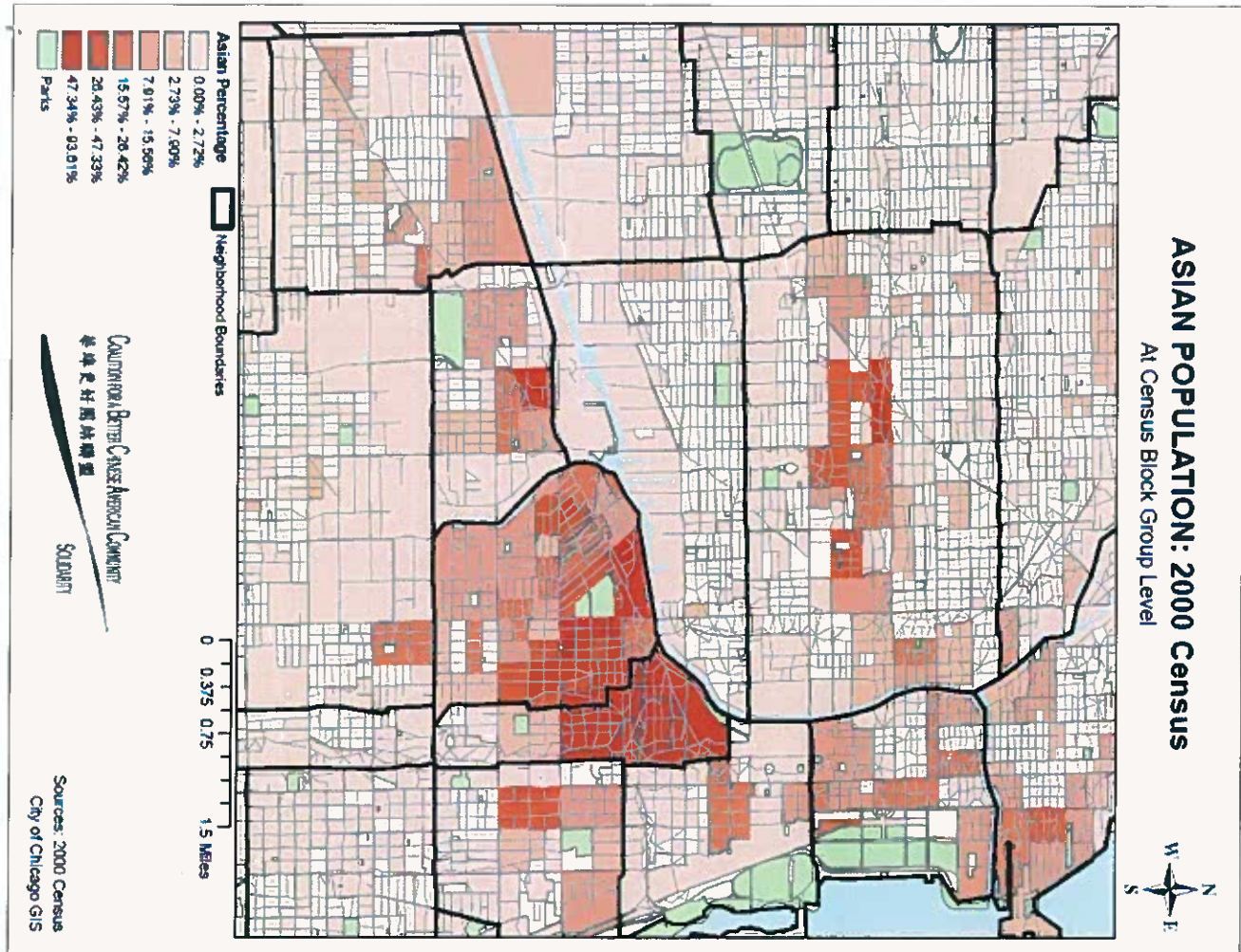
Over the past decade, residents of this Greater Chinatown Community Area have not only increased significantly in number, we have become much more civically engaged as well. The number of registered voters has more than tripled since 2000 and we have increased voter turnout in nearly all of the precincts in which we have done outreach in the past several elections. If Asian Americans had been treated fairly during the last redistricting process, these gains would have meant commensurate impact on our population’s ability to participate in government and make a positive difference in our community. But divided as we were into small fractions of four, and actually now five state representative districts, we have little opportunity to influence the outcome of an election or ensure that our elected officials feel accountable to us.

We as Asian Americans want to be treated fairly during the redistricting process. It is for these and many other reasons that we ask that the Committee to keep the Greater Chinatown Community Area intact as you determine the boundaries of our new legislative maps in the upcoming months. Thank you.

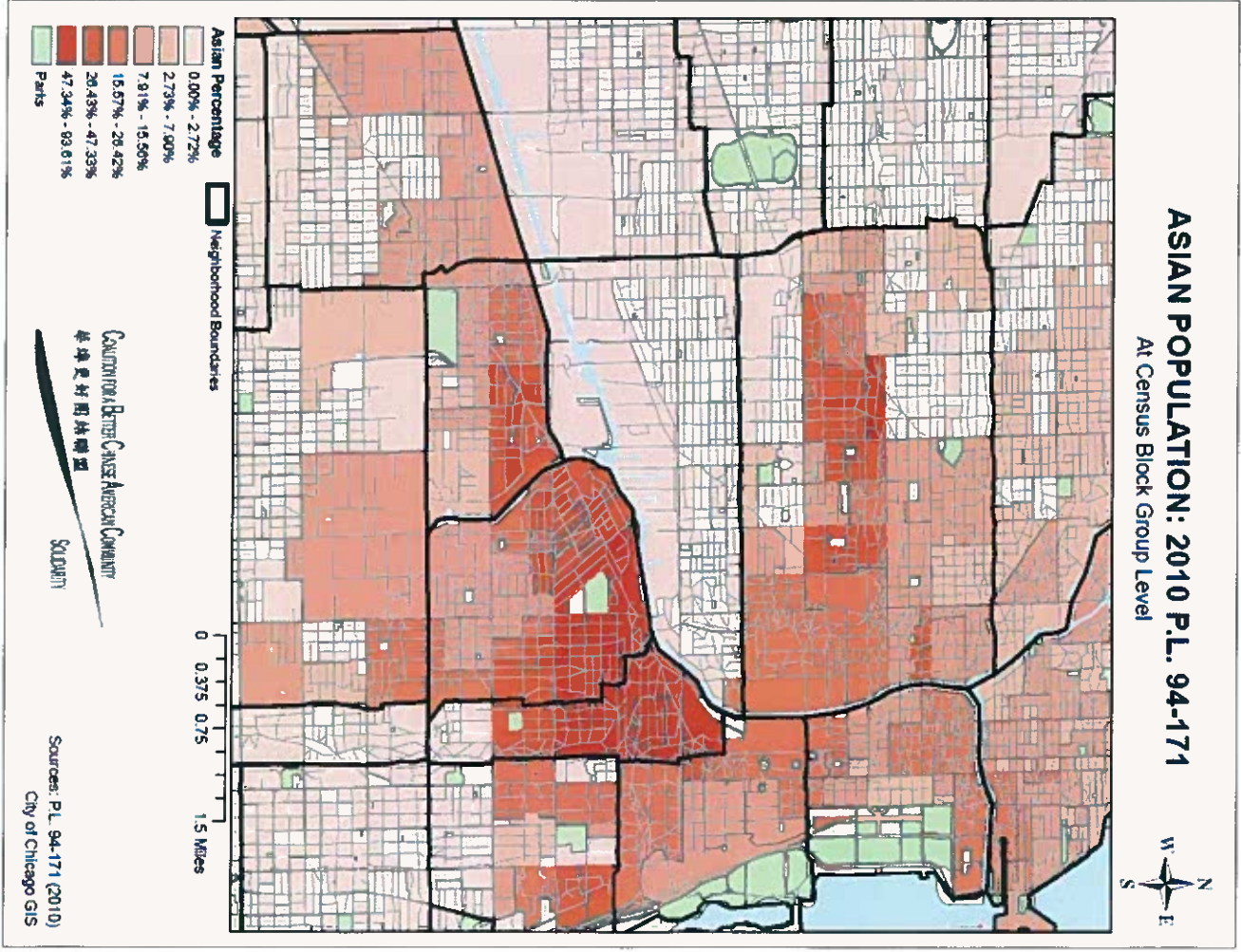
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The **Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community (CBCAC)** is a project of eight major service organizations in the community. CBCAC’s mission is to empower Chinese American communities in Greater Chicago through organizing, civic participation, education and coalition building. CBCAC’s members are: Asian American Institute www.aaichicago.org; Chinese American Civic Council; Chinese American Service League www.caslservice.org; Chicago Chinatown Chamber of Commerce www.chicagochinatown.org; Chinese Mutual Aid Association www.chinesemutualaid.org; OCA Chicago Chapter www.ocachicago.org; Pui Tak Center www.puitak.org; and Southeast Asia Center www.se-asiacenter.org.





[Map 2000_1b]



[Map 2010_1b]