

# Koreatown proposal fails

## COUNCIL OPTS FOR PROCLAMATION HONORING COMMUNITY INSTEAD

By Sandra Gonzales  
*Mercury News*

A push to formally establish a Koreatown in Santa Clara — mirroring proposals in Los Angeles and Garden Grove — was sidelined Tuesday by the city council.

Instead, the council unanimously approved a proclamation recognizing

the Korean community, dashing the hopes of the Korean American Chamber of Commerce of Silicon Valley. The group had sought official recognition for a longstanding cluster of Korean-owned businesses along El Camino Real.

"This is a really good compromise, a really good start," Mayor Patricia

Mahan told the standing-room-only crowd that spilled out of the council chambers. "This was never about forming an enclave."

In addition to seeking the Koreatown designation, chamber officials last year also asked the city council to erect a monument on a median on El Camino Real near Lawrence Express-

## SANTA CLARA

way, and Koreatown signs on Highway 101 and Interstates 880 and 280; hire a police officer who speaks Korean and require Korean-American merchants to post signs in English.

But the chamber's president, Alex

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# KOREATOWN | Push for designation fails

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ander Hull, who earlier in the meeting said the chamber "asked for oranges and ended up getting apples," said he was satisfied with the outcome.

"This is a step forward in the right direction, we look forward to working with the city staff to continue our dialogue."

During the two-hour debate on the issue, Hull said the designation would have enhanced the city's stature, economically and culturally, boosting investment and tourism.

More than 3,000 business owners and residents had

signed a petition supporting the idea. But the proposal met with a firestorm of opposition from residents and officials who argued the designation singled out one ethnicity and seemed exclusive rather than inclusive.

"Santa Clara is a very welcoming environment for all people of any ethnic background," said Doris Atkinson, who submitted nearly 300 signatures against the proposal Tuesday, adding to about 800 that had already been filed with the city. "All businesses can thrive here without the need for any special designations."

City officials, after last year's

presentation by the chamber, were receptive but echoed the concerns of residents who wanted any honors to be inclusive.

Taking a largely legalistic approach, the city noted that most of the chamber's requests require Caltrans' approval. Caltrans regulations prohibit signs that advertise private businesses on a public right of way. At least twice, the city asked Caltrans to consider the chamber's request, but was turned down, said Deputy City Manager Carol McCarthy.

Officials also noted that city parks allow monuments only for individuals or general themes, such as a veterans

memorial. As for hiring police officers who speak Korean, the city said it is actively recruiting applicants and that two candidates are being interviewed.

The city's economic development committee suggested an alternative path, which the council followed, including a proclamation expressing support and appreciation for the Korean-American business community as well as continuing to collaborate with the community and the Korean chamber.

Contact Sandra Gonzales at [sgonzales@mercurynews.com](mailto:sgonzales@mercurynews.com) or (408) 920-5778.

The West Valley Section



*The West Valley Section*

# A KOREATOWN, MARKED OR NOT

"I felt a lot of love and compassion from residents of Santa Clara. It was collegial — there were no arguments, no shouting."

— ALEX HULL, PRESIDENT OF THE SILICON VALLEY KOREAN AMERICAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, AFTER RESIDENTS SPOKE AGAINST A SIGN DESIGNATING A "KOREATOWN" ALONG EL CAMINO REAL



**KOREAN-OWNED BUSINESSES:** Korean-American business leaders want to boost vitality on El Camino Real.



DAI SUGANO — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

**AT MARKET:** Alex Hull, center, head of the Silicon Valley Korean American Chamber of Commerce, chats with Kwang-Hee Lee at the Galleria Market in Santa Clara.

## Opponents say a 'Koreatown' sign in Santa Clara would be divisive

If you didn't know there was a Koreatown in Santa Clara, you probably do now.

Just don't call it that, officially.

The brouhaha Tuesday night over the possibility of a "Koreatown" sign being placed in the median of El Camino Real was easily and neatly dealt with when the city staff said such signs were under Caltrans jurisdiction and likely to be denied. Instead, the city council passed a series of small measures such as building working relationships between the city and the Korean-American



**J.A. Chung**  
in my opinion

can business community.

What the night was about was the complicated feelings we all have about our collective identity among the mosaic pieces of our populace. Ask five people what such a sign would mean and you'd probably get five different answers. Tuesday night's speeches were all about "melting pot" and not promoting one group over another . . . about the long, but unseen history of Koreans in the valley.

A procession of residents and merchants vehemently — though politely — said they viewed such

a sign as "divisive" or separatist in the "All-America City," and they didn't want it. The Silicon Valley Korean American Chamber of Commerce, which proposed the sign and four other requests, clung to the hope that people would understand what they were trying to do.

"I felt a lot of love and compassion from residents of Santa Clara," said Alex Hull, president of the Korean American chamber who nonetheless watched three years of work dissolve into more humble results. "It was collegial — there were no



DAI SUGANO — MERCURY NEWS

**REGIONAL PULL:** The size of the Korean community in Santa Clara attracts Korean shoppers from as far as Monterey who can't find what they want closer to home. Among the main businesses is the Galleria supermarket, seen here. The area also draws Korean-Americans to church.

## CHUNG | Santa Clara refuses 'Koreatown' sign, touts unity

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arguments, no shouting."

He, board chairman Tak Chang, and the group's members still want to find ways to inject more economic vitality into a stretch of El Camino Real. They see the potential for so much more.

What happens next is on everyone's minds. How such aspirations are handled could speak volumes about how a town deals with change, particularly one that wears its "All-America City" distinction for successful collaborative relationships with pride.

Drive down El Camino Real from the Lawrence Expressway to just beyond Kiely Boulevard, and it is a profusion of karaoke bars and shops selling Korean-style tofu soup and pastries. There are supermarkets and a Korean bjjk. If you know where to look, there are designer handbags and luxury goods for less than you'll find in the high-end shops of the Bay Area (so I'm told).

"I can't afford that stuff," said Hull, who has two young daughters whose college tuition he must save for, "but there are Korean tourists who do." Still, many spots on El Camino are a tad worn and frayed.

What non-Koreans like me don't see are the Korean-American families who travel from Fremont or Monterey to go to church, have lunch—and stock up on Korean staples they can't find easily where they live. What we don't see are the dreams to create something newer and more glossy and attractive.



"Our concept of Koreatown is dramatically different from Chinatown, a Japantown and even a Little Saigon. It's a little more cosmopolitan than what people may be thinking."

— ALEX HULL, PRESIDENT OF THE SILICON VALLEY KOREAN AMERICAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Something that both serves nearby residents and draws from outside Santa Clara.

"Our concept of Koreatown is dramatically different from Chinatown, a Japantown and even a Little Saigon," Hull said. They envision a business and cultural center drawing Korean and other tourists, for arts and fine goods. "It's a little more cosmopolitan than what people may be thinking."

Sitting over his favorite chicken-fried steak meal in a Coco's restaurant, Hull is thinking in terms of win-win, in terms of tax receipts for the city, in terms of showing that Korean culture has something to offer, and that Koreans "are nice people."

People like merchant Richard Rusnak, who helped

neighborhood resident Doris Atkinson gather signatures in opposition to the sign under the banner of "Santa Clara Unity," don't need to be convinced of that. Rusnak says he has nothing but respect for Chang, the chairman of the Korean American chamber. Some of the uglier sentiments he heard against the proposal turned him off.

"I'm 70 years old. What am I doing here? I feel if I can play any role at all, I want calm, I want professional. I want peace in my city. I don't want bricks thrown in my windows and I don't want bricks thrown in Korean windows."

Koreatown, in a way, is defacto, he acknowledged.

If people buy a shopping center and develop it and call

it Koreatown or Korean Village, it would be perfectly OK, he said. If they advertised it that way, that's fine. But a city-sanctioned sign bothered him.

Santa Clara's environment is already more attractive than the small Korean business districts in San Francisco and Oakland. One of the hidden blessings, Hull said, was that the controversy and the crowds drew passing attention to their very existence. Chinese and Korean newspapers, ones with global reach, contacted him after Tuesday's meeting.

In retrospect, the proposal may have been overly ambitious.

"A spoonful will not get you full," Hull said, paraphrasing a Korean saying. "We need to learn how to walk first before we start running."

From here, they can work on building relationships and developing specially designed signs with some kind of Koreatown logo or identity that merchants can use on their businesses. They'll work on recruiting Korean-speaking candidates for the police force. And down the road, they may see results—a shopping center, cultural performances, art.

"This can be solved by intelligent people working together," Rusnak said.

Down the road, I'm betting, when people say "Koreatown," others will know what town it's in. Even without a sign.

Contact L.A. Chung at [chung@mercurynews.com](mailto:chung@mercurynews.com) or (408) 920-6280.

The West Valley Section

# WEB VOTE

WWW.MERCURYNEWS.COM/NEWS

## Should Santa Clara designate part of the city Koreatown?

Online vote results:  
Yes: 80 votes (36%)  
No: 141 votes (64%)

To participate in this and other online votes, got to [www.mercurynews.com/news](http://www.mercurynews.com/news).

One of the most active reader votes on mercurynews.com in the past week asked for your thoughts on a request by the Silicon Valley Korean American Chamber of Commerce to officially recognize a cluster of Korean-owned businesses along El Camino Real in Santa Clara. The request was sidelined Tuesday by the city council.

From: cal415

There has been a visible presence of Korean-owned shops along a good portion of El Camino Real for years. It makes sense why they would put forth a proposal, and frankly I don't have a problem with it.



SUSANNA FROHMAN — MERCURY NEWS ARCHIVES

From: SClcalIP

Thank you Korean people for attempting to make this community strong with your businesses. But by opening a Koreatown, it will take away the opportunity of other business owners to have a store on El Camino. We appreciate what you have done for the community, and you should be awarded, but not by basically creating your own separate city.

From: sleek

Everyone should lodge complaints against San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York City, Miami, et al, to eliminate their Chinatowns, Little Italys, Japantowns and Little Havanas. Places like those obviously serve no purpose in enhancing the greater community.

From: buzz653

Do we really need another way to separate one group from the others?

Online chats:  
Monday: Action Line (Dennis Rockstroh). Topic: Consumer issues.

Wednesday: Mr. Roadshow (Gary Richards). Topic: Local traffic and roads. Both chats are from noon to 1 p.m.

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## LATESTLINE

WHO'S UP AND WHO'S DOWN



**HALF A LOAF:** Santa Clara council members sidestepped a request to formally establish a Koreatown district, voting instead for a watered-down motion to "recognize" the city's Korean-American community.

Front Section

ESAY WHAT? AN OCCASIONAL SERIES ON LANGUAGE

# WHAT OUR SIGNS SAY ABOUT US

Ethnic businesses in Silicon Valley face delicate balance of welcoming customers without alienating others



## Failed Koreatown plan in Santa Clara reflects immigration, culture debate

By Mike Swift  
Mercury News

The characters on the signs outside Sung Nam Sun's barber shop in Santa Clara — Golden Hair Studio — are ciphers to English eyes, with the exception of a word in red near: "Open." An American flag is prominent behind the Korean characters on the front glass.

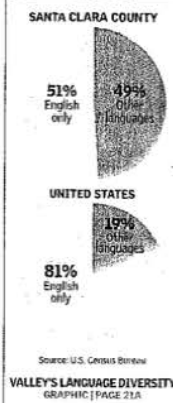
"I like it. Never touch," Sun, a U.S. citizen, says with evident pride in the Stars and Stripes. Apologizing for his halting English, he tries to explain the Korean concept of *Ko Hyung*, which translates loosely as "hometown." Sun

looks out at El Camino Real, mimics the loving arms of a parent holding a child, and says, "El Camino, for the Korean people, it's *Ko Hyung*."

To someone who can't read Korean, Sun's green stucco barber shop might be a betting parlor, a pct shop or a tailor. It takes a little gulp of courage to push inside the door. And that troubles Richard Russek, the owner of Russell's Furniture a short distance up El Camino.

Such signs are not about diversity, he said, they are about exclusion. And that feeling, in January, led the

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# Signs draw, exclude some

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city of Santa Clara to reject a proposal to name a part of El Camino Real "Koreatown." Ruzsak contends that when a sign is not in English, for the English reader, it's signage. "We don't want your business," said the business owner who is proud that his staff, in addition to English, can discuss furniture in a dozen languages. It is impossible to move through early 21st-century Silicon Valley without encountering a hail of languages on street signs, advertising and business signs. Some are so comfortably grafted onto an English-dominant culture, such as Spanish place and street names, that they scarcely register on an English speaker's consciousness.

Silicon Valley is nearly unique in America in the density of its multiple foreign languages. The valley lacks the strictly delimited ethnic turf common in Eastern cities, where whole neighborhoods were set aside for African-Americans, Jews, Italians or Latinos — ethnic enclaves frequently marked by language, culture and class. But few of those cities have strip malls like San Jose's Pacific Rim shopping center on Hostetter Road — a bustling place where bookstores, restaurants, insurance brokers, newstands and real estate agents with business signs in Chinese or Korean characters set out their own kind of commercial ethnic turf.

With two bills in Congress to designate English as the "official" or "national" tongue of the United States, and efforts in New York and other cities to mandate that businesses print their signs at least half in English, language is one arena for the national debate over immigration and culture. The unwise some people feel over signage goes to the heart of an age-old strain in America: To what degree should new arrivals assimilate by using English?

Language is at the heart of how an ethnic group experiences its own ethnicity, but it also touches on power and how the dominant group defines a minority, said Tomás Galguera, a professor of education at Mills College who studies the intersection of language and culture. "All of this is layered upon layers of culture and language and politics," he said.

Some of the opposition to the Koreatown proposal came from immigrants like Sam Kumar, who owns the Mountain House restaurant on El Camino in Santa Clara.

"It will never be in Hindi," Kumar said of the sign above his Indian restaurant. "What connects all of us is English."

## Not like parents Woman follows her own heart

When Doris Atkinson goes to her hairdresser, she tells him to avoid doing anything "that attracts any attention. I want to stay anonymous in this world."

So it hardly felt natural for Atkinson, a homemaker, to spend five months trekking up and down El Camino, talking to hundreds of people who gathered petition signatures against Koreatown.

The daughter of immigrants — her mother is from Hong Kong, her father from mainland China — Atkinson said she felt she had no choice.

She was named after Doris Day, the blond essence of 1950s normalcy. But growing up in Fremont, she said she always felt that her parents were "ethnocentric," feeling "everybody else was not as great as the Chinese. And I differ from that." She never learned Chinese. When she married a white man, her father stopped talking to her for eight years.

For Atkinson, Kumar and Ruzsak, the Korean signs were simply the most visible symbol of what they saw as a larger effort to carve out a separate ethnic enclave within Santa Clara.

"It just struck such a chord with me that I had to go out there every spare moment that I had" to gather petition signatures, Atkinson said. "People



## AT HOME ON EL CAMINO REAL

James Chung buttons his shirt after getting a haircut by Sung Nam Sun at Sari's Golden Hair Studio on El Camino Real in Santa Clara. Sun uses Korean characters to advertise his store and also features an American flag. "I like it. Never touch," Sun, a U.S. citizen, says with pride in the Stars and Stripes. Sun considers the stretch of El Camino as *Ko Hwang*, which translates loosely as "hometown."



## DIVERSITY OR EXCLUSION?

Doris Atkinson, whose mother is from Hong Kong and father is from mainland China, helped defeat a plan to designate a section of El Camino Real in Santa Clara with Korean-owned businesses as Koreatown. "People who put up signs in their own language, they are being xenophobic.... If they only want to remain in their ethnic niche, to me that's not why you come to America."

who put up signs in their own language, they are being xenophobic.... If they only want to remain in their ethnic niche, to me that's not why you come to America. You come to America to assimilate with all the ethnic backgrounds, to embrace the good and the bad of each one."

Ironically, one aspect of the Koreatown proposal advanced by the Korean American Chamber of Commerce of the Silicon Valley was to encourage merchants to display their signs in both English and Korean. "It makes perfect sense," said Chauvin Yon, the chamber president.

Signs in Korean, Chinese and other languages that are incomprehensible to English speakers have drawn opposition elsewhere. The mayor of Bogota, N.J., created a national stir last year when he asked a local McDonald's restaurant to remove its

Spanish billboard. "We're not of a blue-collar working community," said Mayor Steven Lomagnola. People were angry, he said. "They're like, 'What's going on? Spanish people don't want to speak English any more?'" It created an unnecessary division in that regard.

What's the point of sending this message that our Latino population doesn't want to assimilate when actually they do? In New York City, the borough of Queens may be the only

county in America — according to the U.S. Census Bureau — with a greater density of Asian and Latin American languages than Silicon Valley. There, Democratic city council member Tony Avella is trying to force businesses to print their signs at least half in English.

"It's a good neighbor policy," said Avella, who plans to run for mayor of New York City in 2008. "That way the average

Wing Lew's storefront, a large row of Chinese characters marks across the sign above the storefront. A smaller sign in English says, "Wing Insurance Investments."

"For me, I want to be multilingual," said Wing, who was born in Malaysia and speaks Malay, Indonesian and several dialects of Chinese, in addition to English. But he says 70 percent of his customers are Chinese or Vietnamese, and he needs to think about what attracts them.

Increasingly, for many ethnic businesses, there's another consideration: Younger people — many of whom are U.S. born — are more likely to rely on English.

"Both Korean and English is better, because the next generation, they only understand English," said Hye Jung Chung, owner of Hankook Video in Santa Clara, which posts signs in both languages.

Indeed, Sung Nam Sun says one reason why all his signs are in Korean is that much of the clipped hair that ends up on the floor of his barber shop is gray.

His older customers are comfortable with the Korean signs, a fact the 62-year-old barber notes with a wistful smile.

"Young people, different thinking. See?"

American who speaks English can understand and it allows anybody to express their business in their own language." He argues it's a public safety issue: Police and firefighters speaking to an emergency need to know what kind of business it is.

Some First Amendment authorities question whether such a law would violate constitutional protections for free speech. Avella rejects that argument, but he doesn't see his bill becoming law anytime soon.

"A lot of the elected officials are just afraid to touch it," he said, "because it's so controversial."

## A delicate balance Deciding language key to a business

For many ethnic merchants, deciding the language — or languages — of a sign can be a delicate balance. The success of a business can ride upon it.

Zoning and building codes are one source of difficulty. Allen Lin, of Allen Signs in San Jose, which specializes in making signs in Chinese and English, said zoning codes that limit the size of signs frequently make it difficult to produce a sign in two languages with characters large enough to be easily read.

Signs in multiple languages frequently cost more money. And whether the translation is phonetic or conceptual, it can be difficult to render a sign in both English and Chinese and capture the full meaning in both, Lin said.

There are no legal prohibitions in Silicon Valley on the language a business sign is printed in. But Lin said there are many property owners who block businesses from posting signs in Chinese characters.

A lot of property owners are very against the Chinese lettering — a stance Lin thinks is due to prejudice "90 percent of the time."

Many of the business signs at the Pacific Rim shopping center reflect that delicate balance. The shopping center's signs are about evenly distributed between businesses with signs exclusively in English, signs exclusively in another language such as Chinese, and signs that are split between English and a second language.

Located in a neighborhood that has one of the highest proportions of Chinese speakers in Santa Clara County according to 2000 census data, Frank Zhang, who sells books, DVDs and electronic devices, says it just makes sense to have all the signs outside his store in Chinese.

"Most of the people like the Chinese," he said, seeming surprised someone would ask.

Outside insurance broker Wing Lew's storefront, a large row of Chinese characters marks across the sign above the storefront. A smaller sign in English says, "Wing Insurance Investments."

"For me, I want to be multilingual," said Wing, who was born in Malaysia and speaks Malay, Indonesian and several dialects of Chinese, in addition to English. But he says 70 percent of his customers are Chinese or Vietnamese, and he needs to think about what attracts them.

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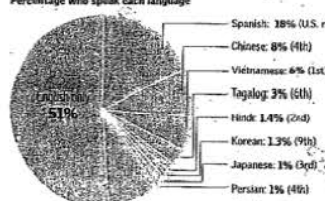
"Young people, different thinking. See?"

Contact Mike Stryker at mstryker@mercurynews.com or (408) 271-8648.

## Santa Clara County's language diversity

There are only five counties (Miami-Dade, the Bronx, N.Y., Los Angeles, Hudson, N.J., and Queens, N.Y.) where the share of people who only speak English is lower than in Santa Clara County.

Santa Clara County Percentage who speak each language



Numbers do not add to 100% because of rounding. Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005 American Community Survey

United States Percentage who speak each language

