

Lowell hopes to put 'Little Cambodia' on the map

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Campaign would promote ethnic quarter as tourist destination

By Sarah Schweitzer, Globe Staff | February 15, 2010

LOWELL - In this city, long a magnet for immigrants, the Cambodian neighborhood has been just one more ethnic quarter, a place where, like the Irish and Dominicans before them, Cambodians labored to navigate the ways of American life.

But with Lowell's Cambodians numbering more than 20,000, the second-largest Cambodian population in the United States after Long Beach, Calif., city officials have begun to wonder whether they are overlooking a cultural commodity. Working with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the city is exploring ways to make the neighborhood a tourist destination, mimicking the successes of Boston's North End and Chinatown.

"When you think of Boston's North End, it's known, you get that feeling of another world. You get that when you go into Chinatown," said Bernie Lynch, Lowell's city manager. "The same could be done here."

Authenticity would be the draw, Lynch and others say. After 30 years of Cambodian influx, the Lower Highlands neighborhood is a vital community. It is a place where the likeness of Apsara, a fabled dancing spirit bedecked in jeweled headdress, hangs on shop walls, and where the elaborate script of the Cambodian language, Khmer, is ubiquitous. Clemente Park, where Cambodians play fierce volleyball games, is now also known as Pailin Park, in reference to the Cambodian province where legend holds that rain washed diamonds down the mountainsides.

City officials are considering a number of ideas to boost the neighborhood's public profile, including the building of an arched entrance, à la Boston's Chinatown; placing signs on highways pointing visitors to the neighborhood; giving the area a name like Little Cambodia; decorating lampposts with banners showing Cambodian themes, such as the silhouetted figure of a boy flying a kite; and sponsoring additional festivals and fairs. (The city hosts an annual Southeast Asian Water Festival in August.)

City officials are concerned about dressing up the neighborhood so much that it loses the authenticity that makes it attractive.

"What I don't want to do is create something that is created for the purpose of just being a tourist zone," said George Proakis, the former city planner who spearheaded the branding move. "We don't want to turn it into a Disney-fied version."

Many Cambodians, though, are enthused without reservation.

"Long Beach has one," said Vanny Ngor, owner of the Red Rose restaurant, referring to the strip of Anaheim Street in Long Beach designated Cambodia Town in 2007. "We need our East Coast version of it."

Pailin Plaza could be a natural destination for tourists, said Sayon Soeun, executive director of Light of Cambodian Children Inc., a nonprofit that provides after-school programs.

"There are signs pointing to the Tsongas Arena, to UMass Lowell," he said. "There should be a sign pointing visitors to Pailin Plaza" as a hub of Cambodian culture.

Cambodians began arriving in significant numbers in Lowell in the early 1980s soon after the collapse of the despotic Khmer Rouge regime. Lowell was one of dozens of American cities that received funding to resettle Cambodians, taking in about 2,000, said Martha Mayo, director of UMass Lowell's Center for Lowell History.

Others followed, drawn by manufacturing jobs. Also important was the early opening of a Buddhist temple and ample and affordable housing in neighborhoods such as the Lower Highlands.

"You'd see women wearing sarongs and flip-flops coming out of grocery stores carrying 25-pound bags of rice," said George Chigas, a political science professor at UMass Lowell who formerly headed the Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale University.

Lowell's Cambodians have shed traditional wear but for some English remains a second language, and a visit to Pailin Plaza, a red-roofed strip mall considered the focal point of the Lower Highlands, is an experience in cultural immersion.

Popular videos at a Cambodian import store are montages of the Cambodian countryside, lush rice fields fringed by palm trees - wistful reminders of a country left behind. The last-minute pickup items banked near the grocery store's checkout counters are not Snickers bars or Cheerios, but boiled peanuts, shrimp snacks, baby duck eggs, and sticky rice pouches wrapped in banana leaves. The breakfast and lunch of choice for many at the Red Rose is noodle soup, slurped while Cambodian karaoke plays on a flat-screen television.

Along with worrying about maintaining authenticity, city officials are also concerned about offending other ethnic groups who live in the Lower Highlands, including Thais, Dominicans, Sierra Leoneans, and Laotians, such as Dayle Khamvongsa, who operates a convenience store. Khamvongsa said that while he doesn't oppose a Cambodian district, he would prefer a more inclusive one that also highlights the neighborhood's other Southeast Asians.

"To designate it as only Cambodia seems a little unfair," Khamvongsa said.

City officials say all ideas are up for consideration.

"If we can give this neighborhood a special identity, it will help promote the city," Lynch said. "Done right, this could give the city a whole other area in our promotions." ■

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