

## City of New Westminster to apologize to Chinese Canadians for past injustices

By **Charlie Smith**

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Activist Sid Tan says New Westminster council's recent vote was "historic".

Two advocates of historical reconciliation for Chinese Canadians have applauded the City of New Westminster for being the first municipality in the country to address this issue.

On June 28, New Westminster city council voted to take 10 actions, including publicly acknowledging that the city contributed to past injustices against the Chinese community. In addition, council voted in favour of issuing a public apology in English and Chinese, and to explore ways of developing a museum exhibit highlighting the city's research into and consultation on its past treatment of Chinese residents.

In a phone interview with the *Georgia Straight*, Chinese Canadian National Council chair Sid Tan described the council's actions as "historic" and "a good start".

"Kudos to the people who were putting it together," Tan said. "We were quite gratified."

However, Tan questioned why the city only examined English-language archives as part of its research, rather than also seeking out Chinese-language sources, including old newspaper records. "They've got the European side of the story—the white side of the story—but they don't have the Chinese side of the story," Tan said, noting that there were Chinese civic champions of the era who criticized what took place. He added that he thinks New Westminster should join the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination, which has a "forward-thinking" municipal charter that commits members to opposing discrimination in the future.

In 2008, Bill Chu, chair of the Canadians for Reconciliation Society, became interested in the city's history after learning that New Westminster secondary school was built on top of a cemetery that included the graves of many Chinese pioneers. After conducting further research, he concluded that New Westminster was an "epicentre" of racism against the Chinese in the late 19th century and the early part of the 20th century.

In a speech last summer at a South Vancouver church, Chu pointed out that New Westminster demolished all traces of its once-thriving Chinatown. He also noted that a New Westminster-born premier, Richard McBride, stated in 1912 that B.C. must be kept "white". Chu told the audience that, in 1923, New Westminster MP W.G. McQuarrie introduced a law in Parliament banning Chinese immigration.

More than a year ago, Chu asked New Westminster council to acknowledge the city's history of discrimination against its Chinese residents. Following Chu's presentation, New Westminster embarked on a two-phase process, beginning with research into the history of racism directed at Chinese people in the Royal City. This was followed by consultations with Chinese Canadians.

In March, staff presented a report to council that was based on a review of council minutes from 1860 to 1926. The report cited evidence of how the city discriminated against its Chinese residents during this period in terms of granting employment and in its requests to senior levels of government.

Tan said that the decision to cut off research in 1926 prevented an analysis of discrimination in the period of official Chinese exclusion, which lasted until 1947.

Council will work with the province and the school district to consider creating a memorial at the former site of the Chinese cemetery. The city will also consider installing plaques and signs recognizing the location of a former Chinatown, and it will work with the school district to highlight the contributions of the Chinese community in New Westminster.

The report to council said several organizations had stated that the process has drawn favourable a response within the Chinese community in Canada and in China. "One organization stated that this 'strengthened relationship could assist the City in securing contracts with Chinese companies and appealing to Chinese tourists'," the report said.

Chu told the *Straight* by phone that council's response will help "so-called minorities" find their place within Canadian history. "In this process, we managed to broaden the meaning of multiculturalism," he said.