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TITLE: Chinatown in Milwaukee? Just maybe;
Backers envision project as magnet for Asian investment

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Think about it: a Chinatown in Milwaukee.

A place for Asians, Asia-philes and curious others to buy hard-to-find edibles (pig's feet, anyone?) and Asian crafts, and even to network for business, pleasure or politics.

"A Chinatown?" asked Pauline Rosenblatt, a local business owner of Chinese descent. "I don't know. In Milwaukee?"

It's a common refrain, to which Robert Kraft replies: "Why not Milwaukee?"

Kraft is one of several business leaders heavily involved in forging connections with China, whose fast-growing economy is destined to shake up the global balance this century. He and others want to persuade wealthy Chinese to invest in the Milwaukee area, thus creating jobs here.

Creating a Chinatown in Milwaukee would make those Chinese who may move here feel more at home, Kraft said. The end result also could make Milwaukee an attractive destination for Asians already in the United States, he said.

Along with several other China-related initiatives, Milwaukee leaders also are working with the federal government to ease immigration for would-be investors from China.

The Chinatown - at this point it's really more of a "Chinamall" - "would be stores, a destination to buy spices, foods, clothing, haircuts, everything," said Kraft, co-chairman of the city's China Council and chief executive of Openfirst, a data processing service bureau.

This "if you build it they will come, and if they come they can help build it" effort is not unprecedented.

The most famous Chinatowns, in coastal cities such as San Francisco and New York, grew naturally out of discrimination, existing immigrant enclaves and grass-roots, often disparate efforts. But some newer Chinatowns have been created in a more top-down fashion.

Las Vegas, for instance, boasts the country's first "master-planned Chinatown." The city's Chinatown Plaza is basically a swank strip mall. It has gift stores, a florist and a Chinese bookstore. It is one reason, some say, that Nevada's Asian population has grown.

Albany, N.Y., broke ground on a similar Chinatown Plaza in 2003 after several years of planning.

Wisconsin has nearly 100,000 residents of Asian descent, a quarter of whom reside in Milwaukee County, according to U.S. census data. A huge portion of Wisconsin's Asian population - more than half, according to state statistics - is Hmong. As in other cities, Kraft said he expects Milwaukee's Chinatown to encompass more than just Chinese business owners, and that the Hmong, the Vietnamese and other Asians would likely play a role.

'It's nice to have a place'

A successful Chinatown in Milwaukee could stimulate tourism and counter the stereotype of Milwaukee as homogeneous, said Min Zhou, a sociology professor at the University of California-Los Angeles, who has studied Chinatowns. "When the Chinese come today, they are very diverse, probably a lot of them are highly skilled, but they still have a cultural, nostalgic type of need. . . . It's nice to have a place they can go to."

The Polacheck Co. is scouting sites for the proposed Chinatown. Kraft, who hopes to start with 10 acres, said the Chinatown could be located in Walker's Point, the Third Ward, the Fifth Ward, even near the Menomonee Valley - nothing's certain yet. He estimated that creating it could cost at least \$10 million for land and rehabilitation of buildings, and said it would be a private effort.

Kraft also said it will be important to have a large Asian grocery store to serve as an anchor for the cluster. One possibility is 99 Ranch Market, an Asian supermarket chain based in California.

The Chinatown proposal goes hand-in-hand with another effort.

The Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce has spent more than a year working with U.S. immigration officials to create a special "investor zone" in southeastern Wisconsin. By meeting the investment requirement - as low as \$500,000 - and creating at least 10 jobs in the zone, foreign investors and their immediate families would get status as U.S. permanent residents, said Lincoln Stone, a Los Angeles lawyer

working with the MMAC on the application.

Such a zone would be very attractive to the growing number of wealthy Chinese, some of whom would be willing to uproot their families to live under a less authoritarian government, said Peter Beitzel, an MMAC vice president. It also would put Milwaukee ahead of many other communities in getting Chinese to invest in the United States.

Milwaukee business leaders are targeting Chinese business leaders in the city of Ningbo, a high-tech center not far from Shanghai. The association expects the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to approve the zone, which spans seven counties, this year.

Varying reactions

Local Asian residents expressed a mix of surprise, skepticism and excitement about having a Chinatown.

Rosenblatt, a Chinese woman from Taiwan, is one of the owners of Artasia, a gallery and store at 159 N. Broadway. She would prefer to see a Chinatown grow naturally in Milwaukee, but admits that's unlikely to happen anytime soon. Many of the Asians in Wisconsin now head to Chicago's Chinatown for their needs, she said.

When he first heard about the idea, doubts gripped Wenbin Yuan's mind, too, but he's since grown fond of the concept. It would be easier to drive to Milwaukee instead of Chicago to find the numerous spices, vegetables and meats not available at existing grocery stores, he said.

"Without a Chinatown, a city is just not considered first-class anymore," said Yuan, chief executive officer of Dakota Intertek Corp., an environmental contracting firm in New Berlin. "A Chinatown doesn't have to be poor people, dilapidated and dealing with people who don't speak English. It can be new and modern. It can be gleaming, high-tech stuff."

Lo Neng Kiatoukaysy, executive director of Milwaukee's Hmong American Friendship Association, said he worried that bringing in an Asian supermarket could endanger the smaller Asian food stores that dot the city.

He also said a handful of Asian businesses on W. National Ave., between S. 27th and S. 39th streets, could someday develop into an "Asiatown," and that perhaps that's the place to invest.

Kraft disagrees. A Chinatown should be "in an area more easily accessible to expressways and to downtown" than the National Ave. strip, he said. Plus, other Asian stores could still serve the communities in

their geographic sectors and even benefit from what could be an influx of shoppers into the main Chinatown, he said.

Kraft said he hopes the first stores in Milwaukee's Chinatown will be open by the end of 2006.