

Koreatown banners to give up their Seoul

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OAKLAND — The district dubbed Koreatown Northgate will retain its moniker when its namesake series of banners comes down from a stretch of Telegraph Avenue at the end of April, but the replacement banner series will better reflect the ethnic diversity of the neighborhood, planners said.

A group of banners strung along Telegraph between 20th and 35th streets stirred controversy last year with its announcement that "Oakland's got Seoul," a pun of South Korea's capital city that caused some local non-Koreans to express anger that their ethnic groups went unrecognized.

In response, the Koreatown Northgate Community Benefit District, made up of neighborhood property owners and chiefly responsible for the banner program, has promised an inclusive approach in the new designs.

"We're working on new banners as we speak," Executive Director Darlene Drapkin said, "with a redesign that reflects more of the community."

Some of that community felt left out the first time around, including local business owner Akilah Zainabu, who said, "Koreatown is not inclusive of the people who live and work here. They didn't talk to anybody; they just came and did this."

Among the possibilities, Drapkin said, is to employ the ARTcart, a hot dog stand-styled public art project funded by the district that ran from July through September last year and collected more than 1,200 pieces of art created by neighborhood residents.

"Art transcends boundaries," ARTcart cofounder Lisa Rasmussen said. "We would have a homeless 26-year-old with a lawyer creating together, and conversation would emerge. The playing field was all level."

A person walking by the ARTcart last year could stop and create art for free with materials in the cart, responding to the cart's theme at the time: "What does 'home' mean to you?"

"We would love for ARTcart to go back on the street," Rasmussen said, "and instead of the home question, asking, 'What do you want the banners to look like?' We really like that because it would engage the community."

Oakland's Community and Economic Development Agency funded a large portion of the original banner program, awarding a \$10,000 grant to the district to pay for the bracket hardware needed to install the banners. The district covered printing and installation costs, but will receive another \$5,000 grant from the agency to remove the banners and hold a series of community sessions to help develop and choose a new design.

This year, however, the district will have to pay for the new banners without help from the city.

"Our committee got shy after the controversy last year," said Kathy Kleinbaum, who manages for the

development agency the redevelopment area in which Koreatown Northgate sits.

"The area is not very obviously a Korean area," Kleinbaum said. "Though there are businesses scattered around, other ethnicities have just as strong a showing. But (the district is) doing their best, looking at their leadership, trying to be more inclusive. We'll be happy to consider a grant for a new banner series next year if the redesign is approved."

For more information on the banner replacement plans and the as-yet-unscheduled public input sessions, go to www.koreatownnorthgate.org or e-mail info@koreatownnorthgate.org.