

## **Grant Sunoo**

### **Director of Community Building and Engagement - Little Tokyo Service Center**

My name is Grant Sunoo, and I am the Director of Community Building and Engagement at the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), a member of the AAPI & AMESMA Redistricting Collaborative.

Our 41-year-old organization is based in Little Tokyo and builds and manages affordable housing, in addition to providing social services to community members.

Established 135 years ago, Little Tokyo is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Los Angeles, and has survived both decimation as a community from the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, as well as many waves of economic hardship, most recently from gentrification and COVID-19. Throughout the years, Little Tokyo has continued to be the cultural center for Japanese Americans, who have fought hard to preserve the cultural, historic, and economic resources of the neighborhood.

Based on our landmarks and community institutions, we believe the boundaries for our neighborhood are Main Street in the west; Temple Street in the north; Vignes Street in the east to E. 1<sup>st</sup> Street, where Hewitt Street becomes the eastern border; and E. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in the south between Main and San Pedro Streets, where E. 4<sup>th</sup> Street becomes the southern border to E. 4<sup>th</sup> Place. Please find the map below for the exact boundaries.

Though our neighborhood is relatively small, our boundaries are well-known and recognizable. We believe it is both feasible and critical that our neighborhood be kept whole.

In addition, we believe that Little Tokyo and Chinatown share the same communities of interest. Our respective neighborhoods are very dense, and residents are predominantly renters. Both neighborhoods are home to many low-income and limited-English proficient residents who are especially vulnerable to displacement and higher costs of living due to gentrification. We ask that Chinatown be included in the same district with Little Tokyo, a position that our community partner in Chinatown also supports.

Beyond the City of Los Angeles, LTSC has been providing social services to members of the Asian American community, particularly to monolingual Japanese and Korean-speakers and their families, throughout Los Angeles County for more than 25 years. One of the regions where we have a strong presence and a satellite office is in the area known as the South Bay, particularly in Gardena and Torrance.

LTSC primarily serves people in need of specific linguistic and/or cultural support. We see individuals and extended families across the entire lifespan, from those with a new addition on the way to people working through the grief and loss of a loved one. Our core services in the South Bay include information and referrals, case management, individual and family therapy, parenting workshops, support groups for caregivers, and other services in Japanese and Korean, as well as in English. More recently, LTSC has provided small business counseling for individuals looking to start something new and for more established entrepreneurs looking to take their business to the next level or get a loan to get through the pandemic.

Over the years, LTSC has worked with a variety of community partners and long-standing institutions in the South Bay to educate the local AAPI community about topics such as

navigating the education system, strategies to deal with bullying, understanding government benefits like Medicare, and planning for end-of-life care. Outreach and events have taken place at a variety of cultural festivals, churches with Asian congregations and other AAPI community institutions. We take most of the social services we provide to elders in the community directly to their home, including at HUD-subsidized senior apartments in the South Bay where more than 90% of residents are immigrants from Asia.

In 2016 and 2017, LTSC conducted a needs assessment to survey and identify the greatest needs facing the Japanese American and Japanese immigrant communities in the South Bay, which is home to the largest concentration of Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants in the mainland U.S. More than a hundred years ago, the first generation “Issei” established many of the institutions that still exist today, such as Japanese language schools and community centers, religious institutions such as the Gardena Valley Baptist Church and Gardena Buddhist Church, and various sports and recreational groups from judo to baseball.

The community has changed over the years and there are significant social, cultural, and linguistic differences between the more assimilated Japanese Americans rooted in the experiences of pre-World War II immigrants, and the more recent post-World War II Japanese immigrants. Many of the younger generations, children and grandchildren, have shifted south into Torrance and the Palos Verdes peninsula, and west toward the Beach Cities. However, in Gardena, people of Japanese ancestry continue to be substantial at over 10% of the population, and in Torrance, the largest city in the South Bay, nearly 13% of the population is of Japanese ancestry.

We have seen similar demographic patterns among other Asian ethnic groups such as Korean Americans and Chinese Americans, with overall population growth throughout the South Bay, especially with younger generations toward the south and west, while maintaining connections with businesses, institutions and elders in Gardena. Torrance First Presbyterian Church, which can be described as a Korean American mega-church, but is so much more, is a bilingual hub for intergenerational community life with young families living in West Torrance picking up their grandparents from senior housing in Gardena. They might pick up groceries in Torrance before stopping for a meal in Gardena on their way back home.

The business corridor that runs north-south along Western Ave from Gardena to Torrance remains a hub of activity and is economically significant for many Asian American businesses from restaurants and medical offices to auto body shops and various import-export companies. People continue to cross city lines to participate in cultural activities and seek services that meet their linguistic and cultural needs. With all these historical, cultural and familial ties, we believe it makes sense to keep Torrance and Gardena together to maintain the economic and social integrity of the Asian American communities that enrich life for everyone in the South Bay.

Thank you for allowing me to share these observations about the Asian American community in Little Tokyo and the South Bay, and thank you in advance for your consideration in keeping these respective Communities of Interest together.

