

# Plaque to honour immigrants detained at historic building

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Recounting the history of the city's one-time immigration building tugged at the emotions of Victoria Coun. Charlayne Thornton-Joe.

In a brief ceremony yesterday at the site of the now-demolished structure, Thornton-Joe had to gather herself as she talked about the Chinese immigrants who stayed there during the first part of the 20th century.

When the stark, red-brick building at Dallas Road and Ontario Street opened its doors in 1907, it was largely Chinese people who were detained. Many were called upon to pay the infamous Chinese Head Tax. At times, the building housed up to 200 people who slept in triple-decker bunk beds as they waited for their immigration applications to be processed.

Thornton-Joe, a Chinese-Canadian, was speaking at an event to mark the past function of the property, which after years as an empty lot is being developed into a townhouse complex called the Breakwater. Three Point Properties organized the gathering to announce plans for a memorial plaque and to make \$2,500 donations to a pair of community groups that help new Canadians of today -- the Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria and the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society.

Three Point Properties also will preserve a large spruce tree planted by the first immigration agent and the original concrete-and-wrought-iron fence around the perimeter, said managing partner Ross Tennant. A monkey puzzle tree also planted by the first agent is still standing nearby.

"While the site was probably a place of uncertainty and sadness for a lot of those who were detained here, it was also a place of new beginnings and new opportunities," Tennant said in explaining the different facets of its past.

For many years, the immigration building was the main point of entry for new Canadians in the western part of the country. Through the decades, it was one of the first sights for the Japanese, the Russians arriving at the time of the 1917 revolution, the Dutch after the Second World War, and Italians, Greeks and Hungarians in the 1950s. It was closed in 1958, and stood empty until it was torn down in 1977.

Thornton-Joe said that after she began to explore her heritage, she soon became aware her ancestors may have come through the building.

"I often went down to this property and wondered whether my grandfathers and my great-grandfathers also stood there many, many years before."



CREDIT: Darren Stone, Times Colonist

Carlos Gaete of the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society, Joan Sandilands of the Inter-Cultural Society of Greater Victoria and Victoria Coun. Charlayne Thornton-Joe stand at the gate of the Breakwater townhouse development on Dallas Road. The townhouses are being built on the site of the Victoria Immigration Building that was demolished in 1977. A plaque will commemorate the many immigrants who passed through the gates.

She applauded the developer's preservation efforts and community donations.

"What a great way to honour the past and celebrate the future," she said.

Joan Sandilands, who appeared on behalf of the inter-cultural association, said life in a new country can be daunting, and must have been "terrifying" for those arriving in Canada at the beginning of the last century.

The memorial plaque, to be displayed when the townhouse project is completed next spring, will read in part that the immigration building "was a symbol of hope, often a difficult hope, that one's life in a new land would be better than the old.

"This monument acts as a reminder of the enormous courage it took to set off on a journey to unfamiliar lands."

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