

HISTORY

Wat Mongkolratanaram (Temple) began out of the desire to form a local Buddhist temple to support the vital spiritual and cultural needs of the growing Thai and Southeast Asian Buddhist community in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 1978, a group of volunteers formed a small Temple committee and invited two visiting monks from Thailand to provide spiritual guidance to the community and leadership through the temple building process. Three years later, the dedication and hard work of this initial committee resulted in the development of the Temple into a Thai Buddhist and cultural center, the establishment of the Temple's permanent home at its current location on Russell Street in the City of Berkeley, and the recognition from the State of California as a nonprofit organization. In 1993, the Temple was recognized as an official religious institution by the City of Berkeley. In 2001, after significant renovations to the Temple building, the Temple was formally recognized as an official Thai Buddhist *ubosoth*, or chapel of worship, in full accordance with Theravada Buddhist doctrine. Since its inception 30 years ago, the Temple has grown in response to meet the growing needs of its community. Presently, the Temple is lead by the guidance of six resident monks serving to meet the community's spiritual and cultural needs.

SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL SERVICES

The establishment of Wat Mongkolratanaram was crucial and its continued existence is crucial to the spiritual and mental well being of the local Thai and Southeast Asian Buddhist community, especially for those so far away from their original homeland. Interest in the Temple's spiritual services has also grown to encompass those from the larger community. The Temple provides a spiritual sanctuary to study and practice Buddhism through meditation, prayer and the guidance of resident and visiting monks. The Temple serves as a place to celebrate and receive blessings for joyous cultural and personal occasions such as religious holidays, weddings, and graduations. The temple also serves as a refuge during times of crisis such as the lost of a loved one or support during times of displacement. This was especially

apparent after the traumatic 1989 San Francisco Earthquake. During this time the Temple became a support center providing access to shelter, food and counseling for the local Thai and Southeast Asian community affected by this natural disaster. The Temple also held fundraisers and donated the proceeds to the United Way to aid in the 9/11 tragedy in 2001 and contributed to the Tsunami relief efforts in 2004. From birth to death, the lives of Buddhists cannot be separated from the life of their temple.

Not only does the Temple serve as a place of worship, it serves as an equally vital cultural and social center. The Temple provides a unique opportunity for the community to preserve Thai cultural heritage by engaging in traditional customs and celebrations. It is a place where people meet, exchange views, share events of their lives and offer support to each other. To foster this community fellowship, the Temple sponsors celebrations for cultural events and holidays and facilitates Sunday services.

As the Thai community grew and began establishing roots in the Bay Area, families were faced with the need to bridge the cultural, linguistic and intergenerational gaps between immigrant parents and their Thai American children. To prevent cultural dissonance the Temple developed a Sunday Culture and Language School in 1980 (Attachment C) shortly after finding its home in Berkeley. This program provides language instruction and teaches children about Thai history, culture and customs. In recent years, this program has expanded to provide a daily summer school schedule and now offers classes to adults that are non-native speakers of the Thai language. In conjunction with this program, the Temple wanted to provide additional activities and enrichment for the growing number of youth in its community. The Temple began offering training in classical Thai dance and traditional Thai music, which ultimately resulted in the establishment of the Thai Cultural Center (TCC) of the San Francisco Bay Area in 1989 (Attachment D). The TCC offers classes every Sunday afternoon during the school year with a more intensive program every summer. The students perform for a variety of cultural shows, fundraisers, Thai Buddhist holidays, festivals and private functions throughout the Bay Area, including events at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco City Hall, the San Francisco Chinese New Year's Street Festival and the University of California, Berkeley. The students are also given

the rare opportunity to perform internationally at events coordinated by the TCC and the Temple.

SUNDAY SERVICES AND FOOD OFFERING

Theravada Buddhism is practiced by approximately 95% of the population in Thailand. There is virtually a temple in every town. Buddhist doctrine dictates that monks may not as laymen. Their time is to be spent studying, practicing and teaching Buddhist philosophy and offering spiritual guidance and support to the community, as well as maintaining temple grounds. Traditionally, the community in which the temple serves thus offers food and alms to the monks in order to achieve the basic living needs of the monks and provide means to maintain the temple. This act of giving and receiving is traditionally practiced every morning. The monks stand outside in the community, each with a large metal bowl and members of the community, performing the Buddhist practice *Dana*, or giving, will put their offerings within that bowl. The food given to the monks is then blessed. Once the monks have finished their meal, the remaining food is shared with the community. Alms given are put towards other basic needs and the related costs of maintaining a temple. Giving to the monks and the temple is seen as a merit-making activity which Buddhists consider as a means of spiritual development and preserving the path of virtue. Wat Mongkulratanaram strives to continue this Buddhist tradition but has adapted accordingly to a vastly different society and culture within the United States where standing outside with a bowl would be considered panhandling, where the community in which the temple serves maintain more demanding schedules and is spread out much farther and wider, and where the costs of maintaining basic living needs and temple grounds are significantly higher. Additionally, the Temple has also incorporated the Language and Culture School and the Thai Cultural Center as part of its cultural program, which would not traditionally be associated with a temple.

In following tradition, food and alms are given to the monks of Wat Monkulratanaram by the community in which it serves. The Temple has focused this activity to Sundays, however, to

accommodate the demanding lives and schedules of the community. During earlier years of the Temple's services, people would bring food offerings to the monks and the remaining would be shared with each other. As time progressed and the Temple community grew larger, a group of volunteers began preparing the food in exchange for a donation to the Temple to ease the burden on the community and to ensure that there would be enough food for everyone in attendance. This practice continues today at a larger scale due to the growth in the Temple community and the interest of the public and larger community. The broader interest in the Temple's Sunday activities did not come from advertising or solicitation. It came from the interest of the larger community's desire to contribute to a good cause while enjoying a good meal. Volunteers still prepare and cook the food as they did in the beginning and all donations received from the Sunday services go to funding the Temple, its services and ultimately the community. Buddhists also view the contribution of time and services for the good of the community as a merit-making activity. Volunteers, which include many of the community's elderly, benefit spiritually through their merit, but also psychologically through the knowledge that they are productively contributing to the community, as well as through the ability to have positive interaction with others.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONCERNS AND MEDIATION SESSIONS

The neighbors allege that the Temple's Sunday food offering is commercial or restaurant in nature. The Temple respectfully argues that this is not the case. As stated above, the contributions of the volunteers and the donations received from the community go to fund the Temple, its services and ultimately the community. The following information will allow the Board to better understand how the Temple allocates of the funds received:

- **Support of Six Resident Monks and Visiting Monks** - Donations support the basic living needs of six resident monks who provide spiritual guidance, support, and leadership and look after the Temple grounds. This includes food, traditional monk's attire and medical care. Donations also fund the continual religious training of resident monks which

include attendance at local seminars and retreats as well as training sessions at Buddhist monasteries in Thailand.

Additionally, the Temple sponsors a visiting monks program. Monks from Thailand visit the Temple to bring over knowledge of their training from traditional Buddhist institutions in Thailand. They also support resident monks in providing spiritual leadership and guidance to the community. The temple provides for all travel and boarding expenses for the visiting monks.

- **Sunday Language and Culture School** - Donations fund the needs of the school including supplies, materials and teaching aids. The students are taught by visiting instructors from the Bansomdejchaopraya Rajabhat University's international teaching program in Thailand. The Temple sponsors the travel and boarding expenses for two teachers every year and an additional two teachers during the summer. These native Thai teachers work with resident school facilitators and teachers to plan effective curriculum, plan enriching activities and provide instruction to the youth of the community throughout the year. This is an extremely rare and unique opportunity for both the teachers and the students to participate in language and cultural exchange.
- **Thai Cultural Center** - The visiting teachers for the Sunday School are also trained in classical Thai dance and music. They also work with the TCC's resident cultural facilitators and instructors to provide training to the students.

Donations sponsor the materials and expenses necessary for the children to engage in local performances. This includes the traditional costumes and musical instruments necessary for practice and performance. These items are only made in Thailand and must be imported. Additional expenses include the maintenance of a rehearsal space and transportation expenses. Additionally, the Temple provides assistance to the TCC

for international trips for the children to perform in Thailand. One of these trips to Thailand involved fundraising performances to benefit Thai orphanages.

- **Temple Grounds, Maintenance and Landscaping** - Donations fund the mortgage, property taxes and insurance costs for the Temple buildings and property.

Although monks provide the labor involved in maintaining the Temple grounds, donations are used to provide for utilities, repairs, renovations, sanitation and other necessary building maintenance requirements. Materials are also required to maintain the flower and vegetable garden, as well as to maintain the exterior landscaping which contributes to the visual quality of the neighborhood.

- **Religious Materials** - Buddhism involves the use of materials to perform ceremonies such as candles, incense, flowers, amulets and statuary. Amulets and statuary must be imported from traditional Buddhist monasteries in Thailand to have spiritual merit.

Although this is not an exhaustive list of expenses, it demonstrates the Temple's need for the donations provided by the Sunday food offering. The religious, cultural and educational programs provided by the Temple to support and enrich the Thai community and the larger community would cease to exist without the support of the donations received. We ask the Board to consider the negative impact on the Temple, the community and the City of Berkeley if these programs could not continue.

The Temple would like to continue to add to the rich and vibrant culture of the neighborhood and the City of Berkeley made possible through its Sunday services, but was made aware of the impact it had on certain neighbors. The concerns from the group of neighbors, residing predominately on Oregon Street, regarding Temple activities and the proposed Buddha Sanctuary that was submitted in a letter to the Zoning Adjustments Board dated April 17, 2008 (Attachment E), voiced at the April 24, 2008 public hearing and discussed at subsequent

mediation sessions. The Temple has reviewed and given serious consideration to these concerns and has made every attempt to come to a resolution with this group of neighbors. The following is a list of the concerns of the neighborhood followed by a detailed account of the Temple's efforts in this process:

- The neighbors are concerned about early morning noise levels caused by the preparation for Sunday activities.

The Temple has changed its preparation time for Sunday activities to 8:00 AM instead of 5:30AM previously. Temple volunteers were also informed about the concern and instructed to keep their noise level to a minimum. The Temple immediately implemented this policy upon notification of the concern.

- The neighbors are concerned about odors caused by food provided by the Temple.

The Temple has done its best to mitigate this concern by ensuring that all cooking is prepared indoors.

- The neighbors are concerned about the Temple's Sunday activities causing parking problems.

The Temple has always encouraged the use of public transportation, bicycling or walking to visit its facilities. The Temple also posts visible signs warning visitors against blocking driveways of private properties. After the public hearing, the Temple has also made arrangements with Any Mountain, a nearby merchant, for permission to use its parking lot consisting of 32 dedicated spaces (Attachment F).

Please note that the immediate area surrounding the Temple includes the extremely popular Berkeley Bowl market, Grove Park, a high use recreational facility on Martin

Luther King, Jr. Way and the Ashby Flee Market held every weekend just one block away from the Temple (Attachment G). The popularity of these facilities all contribute to the parking and congestion in the area. The Temple's activities are not the sole cause of this problem and although we make attempts to mitigate the issue, a viable solution to this problem could only be successful through the collaboration of multiple agencies including the City of Berkeley.

- The neighbors requested that the tent located nearest to the 1911 Oregon Street property be removed.

The Temple has compromised in this matter by setting up the tent only during Sunday activities and removing it for the rest of the week.

- The neighbors are concerned about trash and litter left behind by Temple visitors.

The Temple has always encouraged visitors to dispose of trash properly through posted signs and verbal requests and by making trashcans and recycling bins amply available. The trashcans are promptly emptied when they become full. Additionally, the Temple has an existing cleaning committee that patrols Russell Street and Otis Street to pick up any litter as part of its service to the neighborhood. The patrol was expanded to Oregon Street once the Temple was made aware of the concerns of the neighbors.

- The neighbors requested the hours and number of visitors be reduced.

The Temple's original public hours on Sundays were from 8:30 AM to 4:00 PM. To address the concerns of the neighbors, immediately after the public hearing, the Temple reduced its Sunday hours from 10:00 AM to 1:00 PM. This limited three hour time frame has reduced the number of Sunday visitors and related traffic to the Temple substantially.

- The neighbors do not want the proposed parking lot on Oregon Street.

The Temple is working with the City of Berkeley to re-locate the parking lot so that it will be accessible through Martin Luther King, Jr. Way. The lot on Oregon Street will remain as an open space and designed into a Buddha Garden (Attachment H).

- The neighbors do not want the proposed additional tables or parasols.

The Temple has removed the plans for the proposed additional tables and parasols.

- The neighbors requested that permeable pavers be incorporated into the parking lot plan.

The Temple has asked the architect to incorporate permeable pavers into the design of the parking lot.

- The neighbors are concerned that it is difficult to communicate with the Temple.

The Temple has always had an open door policy. This is evident in the diversity of our visitors. In good faith, the Temple has become more proactive about communication with the neighborhood through communication materials and by hosting a neighborhood gathering, which will continue on as part of the Temple's events program (Attachment I).

- Additionally, the Temple has received a pre-permit from the City of Berkeley Environmental Health for our kitchen (Attachment J).

As demonstrated above, the Temple has addressed each concern with thoughtful consideration and in good faith has provided and implemented compromises to alleviate impact on our neighbors, while continuing to coexist. During mediation sessions between both parties held on June 24, July 19 and August 6, 2008 through the East Bay Community Mediation services, however, the neighbors have refused to accept any of our proposals or offer a solution that would be fair to both parties. Their only stance is to have the Temple completely discontinue our Sunday activities or displace the activities to a different location. This stance is not a compromise, but rather a demand that would drastically impact the welfare of the Temple and the community it serves. As stated previously, without the donations received from the Sunday food offering, the Temple would not be able to provide vital spiritual support for the Buddhist community or offer enriching cultural and educational programs greatly impacting the children that currently participate. Displacing the Temple's activities is also not possible. To remove the activities from the Temple grounds would completely strip it of Buddhist or spiritual merit. It is not just food that is provided at the Sunday services, but also fellowship and spiritual development that cannot be displaced from the Temple. Additionally, the neighbors request the proposed Buddha Sanctuary be re-designed to lower or remove the *mondop* or steeple. The Buddha Sanctuary is designed according to traditional Thai Buddhist principles and has been scaled down in height and foot print immensely in consideration of the neighborhood. To have a Buddha Sanctuary without the *mondop* or lower its height would greatly impact the authenticity and religious merit of the building as a Buddha Sanctuary. We would like to note that the *mondop* is a small scale architectural feature with low impact. According to the Zoning Adjustments Board Staff Review (Attachment B), the "height exception is consistent with other City approvals for similar structures within Residential Districts." It can be compared to a raised church cross or small steeple.

The Temple endeavors to contribute to a peaceful, friendly and vibrant neighborhood spirit and has demonstrated that we have approached this matter with respect and consideration of the neighbors on Oregon Street. We have also approached this matter with respect and consideration to the neighbors and the larger community that whole heartedly support and benefit from our activities and services. We hope that the Board can understand that what is at

stake here is not merely a social gathering, but rather a social gathering that provides invaluable resources for children, students, teachers, immigrants, families and Buddhists that extend beyond a weekly three hour time frame.

CITY OF BERKELEY ARTS AND CULTURE PLAN

Over the years the past 30 years, the Temple has grown into a renowned artistic and cultural institution. It has been featured in local murals (Ashby & Martin Luther King Jr. Way), the book, Berkeley the Life and Spirit of a Remarkable Town (Frog, Ltd. Berkeley, 2004), and National Public Radio's All Things Considered (December 2006). As previously stated, the students from the Thai Cultural Center perform for a variety of cultural shows, fundraisers, Thai Buddhist holidays, festivals and private functions throughout the Bay Area, including events at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco City Hall, the San Francisco Chinese New Year's Street Festival and the University of California, Berkeley, as well as internationally. Our Sunday Language and Culture School provides a unique educational opportunity for children and adults to learn about the rich and lively traditions of Thai culture. We ask the Board to please consider this contribution to the City of Berkeley's artistic and cultural breadth in reference to the City's Civic Arts Commission Arts and Culture Plan adopted by the City Council in 2004. The plan establishes citywide goals and strategies to support and develop local arts, culture, and entertainment (Attachment K). Recommendations include the following:

- Protection and enhancement of existing arts facilities.
- Increase the diversity of participants in the arts through outreach to minority, low-income and disabled populations.
- Include all segments of the community and all levels of artists in a citywide effort to cultivate the arts.
- A special initiative to provide arts information to young populations.
- More arts teachers in schools and a higher quality and diversity of arts programs.
- Cultivate "localism" by building local participation in arts and cultural activities within Berkeley's city limits.

Through the efforts of the Thai Cultural Center, the Sunday Thai Language and Culture School and the diverse community that the Buddhist faith attracts, the Temple has overwhelmingly met the artistic and cultural development goals defined by the City of Berkeley itself. The Temple has been able to cultivate its arts and culture program without financial assistance from the City because the Berkeley community understands the value of our activities and services and continues to support us by attending our Sunday services. Should the Temple be forced to cease the Sunday food offering services, our arts and language programs would be forced to close. This would be a great disservice to the community and to the City of Berkeley's mission to cultivate local arts and culture.

CONSIDERATIONS

The Temple has presented to the Board our thorough cooperation in trying to resolve the concerns of the neighbors located on Oregon Street. We have also provided detailed information of our 30 year history in the City of Berkeley, the whole-community benefits from our spiritual, cultural and educational programs and our contribution to the City of Berkeley's efforts to continue its reputation as an open and diverse community rich in history, arts and culture. Based on this information, we respectfully encourage the board to approve our application for a broader land use permit to continue our Sunday food services, so that we may continue to benefit and serve the community.