



APOLOGY FOR HISTORIC DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PEOPLE OF CHINESE DESCENT

I stand before you on behalf of the City of Burnaby to acknowledge and apologize for our historic discrimination against people of Chinese descent.

Today we shine a light on the historic wrongs and systemic racism perpetuated by Burnaby’s municipal government and elected officials between 1892 and 1947 and commit to ensuring that this dark period of our City’s history is never repeated. We accept responsibility for Burnaby’s role in perpetuating racism and exclusion, and we commit to actions to address the ongoing legacies of historic discrimination and to build a brighter future for our community.

Between 1892 and 1947, our municipal government used its powers to enact bylaws and undertake actions that were discriminatory against people of Chinese descent.

- In 1892, we enacted a bylaw to prohibit the employment of Chinese and Japanese workers by the municipality, or its contractors. As the fourth bylaw enacted by the young municipality, it established a foundation of racist exclusion.
- We restricted the ability of people of Chinese descent to own land and we introduced regulations that limited their ability to earn a living.
- We supported provincial laws that denied the rights of people of Chinese descent to vote or run for office in federal, provincial and municipal elections. As a result, Chinese Canadians were not able to participate in democratic processes to challenge laws that discriminated against them.
- Council endorsed petitions from community groups calling on senior levels of government to further restrict immigration from Asia and give local governments more powers to legislate discrimination. Council’s endorsements normalized racism and encouraged other levels of government to continue introducing discriminatory measures.

These actions are only a few of the many ways in which Burnaby discriminated against people of Chinese descent. These actions were intended to discourage people of Chinese descent from settling and thriving in Burnaby. The goal of these actions was exclusion.

Despite the municipality’s attempts at exclusion, Chinese Canadians in Burnaby were resilient and made a place for themselves in this city. They ran successful businesses, worked in a variety of industries, helped to clear land and construct railway lines, and established farms that fed Burnaby and the region.

Most importantly, the Chinese community did not lose hope for a just future with equal opportunity. They spoke out against discrimination, advocated for change, and supported each other through difficult times.

Chinese Canadians bravely volunteered to serve in the Canadian armed forces during the First and Second World Wars. Their service and sacrifice were pivotal to Chinese Canadians successfully advocating for the right to vote in 1947. Along with advocates from South Asian communities, they argued that if Chinese and South Asian soldiers were able to serve in the war effort as citizens of Canada, they should be granted full citizenship rights, including the right to vote.

In response to community advocacy, Burnaby’s Council began taking actions toward dismantling our racist policies and practices. In 1947, Burnaby asked the Province to update the Municipal Elections Act to recognize the right of citizens of Chinese and South Asian descent to vote in municipal elections. And in 1953, Bylaw 4, which had prevented employment by people of Chinese and Japanese descent by the municipality and its contractors for six decades, was repealed thanks to the persistence of Burnaby’s first employee of Chinese descent, Richard Samuel Lee, with support from the Chinese Benevolent Association.

We are inspired by the persistence, resistance and resilience of the Chinese diaspora who struggled and advocated for equality and for inclusion, and whose sacrifices have made our community, our province, and our country better.

The legacy of activism and sacrifice in the fight against anti-Chinese racism and discrimination reminds us that a commitment to building an inclusive future requires more than words: it requires action. It requires us to take responsibility for the work of denouncing racism and pursuing equity. This work has too long been shouldered unequally by racialized community members.

Today, we denounce the actions of the past that discriminated against people of Chinese descent. We denounce the racist ideology that treated some categories of people as superior to others. Those ideas created harmful legacies that continue to shape present-day racism in Canada, and in our community. Burnaby’s greatest strength is its diversity, and our community is stronger because of its diversity of viewpoints, cultures, faiths, languages and traditions.

Today, we acknowledge the descendants of the early Chinese Canadian community members whose families were directly impacted by our historic discrimination. Please accept our appreciation for the contributions your parents and grandparents made to our community and their efforts for change. Our actions made life harder for them, and for all community members of Chinese descent. For that, we are deeply, deeply sorry.

Today, we learn from the past to forge a more inclusive future where all community members are safe, welcomed and valued.

Today, we commit to action.

We commit to promoting awareness of Chinese Canadian contributions to Burnaby’s history, including commemorating significant people, places and events, and sharing educational resources so that these stories are never forgotten. We will also facilitate intercultural education so we can all learn about each other’s cultures, histories and traditions.

We commit to internal actions that make civic processes more accessible and inclusive by providing cultural competency training to City staff and encouraging participation from diverse communities in the development of City policies and programs.

We commit to creating a Burnaby where racialized community members feel safe. This includes delivering core community safety programs in Chinese languages, addressing hate-based graffiti, and building relationships between emergency services staff and racialized communities.

We commit to embedding anti-racism and inclusion in the policies, plans and strategies that guide the future planning of our city and delivery of services to residents.

Today, we are dedicated to continuing to build Burnaby as a diverse and inclusive community. Let us never forget that present day Burnaby is more welcoming because of early Chinese Canadian community members who challenged racism and exclusion.

We express our deep gratitude to those who paved the way for the present, who challenged us when we were wrong, and whose legacy of activism has enriched the city we live in.

Lastly, thank you to everyone who is here today to bear witness to this apology, and to our commitment to future action.

November 15, 2025

City of Burnaby