Callowhill Business Improvement District
Vote and Statement from Asian Arts Initiative
August 7, 2019

After much consideration and deliberation with staff, board, and community members, Asian Arts Initiative intends to submit a no vote on the Callowhill Business Improvement District (BID) as currently proposed to City Council.

We stand for the services offered by the Callowhill BID, like litter pickup, additional street lighting, and “greening” projects. These services were also identified in our recent People:Power:Place cultural plan, which was written with the involvement of members of the Callowhill BID committee, and many other community members. The recommendations we made as a cohort, while obvious as an end result, still came as a result of long, thoughtful, equitable, and inclusive discussion. No strategic directive was made without thorough feedback. The process was transparent. A direct result of this process was the cultural plan, whereby Asian Arts Initiative has committed funding to directly support neighborhood-based artists and cultural groups through our Shared Spaces 共享空間 program, and through the Parks for Chinatown programs which have activated the Rail Park with arts programming, in close collaboration with the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, and the Friends of the Rail Park.

We do continue in principle to be wary of the mechanism of levying a small tax on local residents and businesses to fund these services, and certainly when the burden is sheltered inside complicated penalties, amounting to further fines, and alluding to expulsion. We believe that the privatization of public services--be they schools, prisons, or in this case, street cleaning--privileges the upper-middle class residents of the neighborhood, while disincentivizing the lower-class and immigrant residents of our neighborhood. The boundaries of the BID as proposed, concentrate these services West of 10th Street in our Callowhill/Chinatown neighborhood, where the average income is $58k/year, and simultaneously overlooks the areas East of 10th Street, where the average income is $23.6k/year. We believe that the only equitable delivery of these services relies on the City of Philadelphia to restore these services as a condition of the many taxes it levies to its citizens, and that this outcome is achievable through our shared advocacy. (cont’d)
Asian Arts Initiative recognizes the hard work and determination of the Callowhill BID committee, and offer our space and platform to further facilitate the discussion and the work of improving the neighborhood with full faith in the services proposed, but we must ultimately stand by our mission and principles as an organization, and vote no on the Callowhill BID. We will continue to rely on our history offering diverse programs, and we look forward to hosting ongoing discussions as a connector where neighbors can come together.

Signed,

The Staff of Asian Arts Initiative