

**TO:** ACTING CITY MANAGER **DATE:** 2021 April 20

**FROM:** DIRECTOR PLANNING AND BUILDING **FILE:** 77000 05  
DIRECTOR PARKS, RECREATION AND *Reference:* SFU  
CULTURAL SERVICES

**SUBJECT:** **COMMEMORATION OF THE *KOMAGATA MARU***

**PURPOSE:** To provide recommendations for the commemoration of the *Komagata Maru*.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. **THAT** Council issue a proclamation in May 2021 to mark *Komagata Maru* Remembrance Day.
2. **THAT** Council support recognition of the *Komagata Maru* with an interpretive sign, as outlined in *Section 4.2* of this report.
3. **THAT** a copy of this report be forwarded to the Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society.
4. **THAT** a copy of this report be forwarded to the Executive Committee of Council, the Community Heritage Commission, and the Parks, Recreation and Culture Commission.

**REPORT****1.0 BACKGROUND**

At its 2020 January 09 meeting, Council referred correspondence from Mr. Raj Singh Toor of the Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society to the Executive Committee. The correspondence was subsequently received by the Executive Committee on 2020 February 05, at which time Mr. Toor appeared as a delegation. On behalf of the Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society, Mr. Toor requested that Council consider commemorating the history of the *SS Komagata Maru*, a ship that brought prospective immigrants from Punjab, India to Canada in 1914. The ship and its passengers were denied entry, and after two months most of the passengers were forcibly returned to India. The event, known as the Komagata Maru incident, has become a significant touchstone in the history of racial discrimination in Canada.

The Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society have advocated for commemoration of the event in communities across Canada, and request that the City of Burnaby participate by naming a civic asset, such as a park or street, in recognition of the event.

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This report outlines the historical significance of the Komagata Maru incident and recommends its commemoration through a proclamation and interpretive sign.

The report is being advanced directly to Council rather than the Executive Committee, with the concurrence of the chair of the Executive Committee, due to time requirements to prepare the recommended proclamation as outlined in *Section 4.2*.

## 2.0 POLICY FRAMEWORK

The proposal to commemorate the Komagata Maru incident aligns with the following goals and sub-goals of the *Corporate Strategic Plan*:

- ***A Connected Community***
  - Partnership – Work collaboratively with businesses, educational institutions, associations, other communities and governments
- ***An Inclusive Community***
  - Celebrate diversity – Create more opportunities for the community to celebrate diversity
  - Create a sense of community – Provide opportunities that encourage and welcome all community members and create a sense of belonging

## 3.0 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The *Komagata Maru* was a ship carrying 376 prospective immigrants from Punjab, India that was not permitted to dock in British Columbia in 1914. The ship was declared in contravention of the “continuous journey regulation” which was a discriminatory federal government regulation intended to prevent migration from India.

The passengers, all of whom were British subjects, remained on board the ship for two months in Coal Harbour, while the local South Asian community supplied them with food and water, and organized to fight their deportation by retaining lawyers to challenge the continuous journey regulations. They did not win their legal battle, and the ship and its passengers were forced to return to India. Upon the ship’s return to India, passengers came under fire from the British Colonial forces. 19 of the passengers were killed, with many others injured and/or arrested.

Later, some of the passengers or members of their families made their way to Canada. Raj Singh Toor’s grandfather, Baba Puran Singh Janetpura, was a passenger aboard the ship, and was forced to return to India. His grandsons, Raj Singh Toor and Jas Singh Toor, immigrated to Canada in 1976 and 1983, respectively.

The incident is a significant moment in the history of South Asian migration to Canada, and a symbol of the early struggle of South Asian Canadians for justice and equality.

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At the time of the incident in 1914, Burnaby was home to South Asian community members. Many South Asian migrants in that period worked in the lumber industry, and data from the 1911 census identifies men from India working in sawmills throughout Burnaby, and several employed in land clearing. Burnaby historian George Green noted a camp of Asian and South Asian workers existed at present day Gamma and Albert in the early 1910s, made up of workers who harvested “shingle bolts” from stumps to sell to shingle mills. There were many small shingle mills in Burnaby (particularly along Burrard Inlet) which would have employed South Asian workers. In other parts of British Columbia, shingle mills were sometimes owned by South Asian entrepreneurs, and that may have been the case in Burnaby.

The North Pacific Lumber Mill at Barnet employed both Muslim and Sikh workers from India between 1911 and the mid-1920s when new mill owners introduced a “white-only” employment policy. The mill was closed permanently during the Great Depression in the 1930s, and ownership of the site reverted to the Municipality. The mill site was purchased by businessman Kapoor Singh Siddoo, and re-opened in 1938. Siddoo continued the earlier tradition of hiring Asian, South Asian, and European workers at the mill.

Siddoo came to Canada from Punjab, India in 1885 and became a successful businessman. He was also a moderate political activist and pacifist who spent decades pressing for better treatment of South Asian people in Canada. He was commemorated by the City of Burnaby in 2017 with a Burnaby 125 plaque at Barnet Marine Park, and installation of a Stop of Interest sign at Barnet as part of the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure’s highway signage program.

#### **4.0    **COMMEMORATION OF THE *KOMAGATA MARU*****

##### **4.1    **Commemoration and Acknowledgement****

Formal apologies for the Komagata Maru incident were made by the Government of BC in 2008, and the Government of Canada in 2016. The City of Vancouver made a formal apology in 2020.

In 2012, a federally funded monument was unveiled at Coal Harbour in Stanley Park, on the shore where the ship had been anchored. The site also includes a complementary Komagata Maru Memorial, which was developed by the Khalsa Diwan Society in cooperation with the Vancouver Parks Board.

The Descendants of the Komagata Maru have approached local governments in Canada to request they consider commemorating the incident. Several have done so, through naming initiatives, installation of commemorative signage, and by proclaiming Komagata Maru Remembrance Day.

In 2019, the City of Brampton, Ontario opened a brand new park, which they named Komagata Maru Park. Also in 2019, the City of Surrey assigned “Komagata Maru Way” as a commemorative name to a portion of 75A Avenue and installed storyboards in nearby R.A. Nicholson Park to interpret the story of the *Komagata Maru*, and the history of Surrey’s earliest South Asian residents. In 2020, the City of Delta approved installation of two storyboard signs commemorating the *Komagata Maru* at the North Delta Society Heart Plaza.

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In early March 2021, the City of New Westminster announced they will rename the two docks that serve the Q to Q ferry (in Queensborough and Quayside in downtown New Westminster), and the riverfront walkway in Queensborough, in honour of the *Komagata Maru*. They also intend to install interpretive panels to tell the story of the ship, and its connection to New Westminster’s history.

Some governments have issued proclamations declaring May 23 “Komagata Maru Remembrance Day,” including Port Coquitlam, Surrey, Vancouver, and the Government of BC. May 23, 1914 is the day the ship arrived in Coal Harbour.

#### **4.2 Proposed Commemoration**

While the Komagata Maru incident did not take place in Burnaby, it impacted South Asian people throughout BC and Canada, including Burnaby. Commemorating the incident aligns with the current values of the City expressed in the Corporate Strategic Plan, and provides an opportunity to recognize the presence of South Asian residents as early residents of Burnaby. Acknowledging the histories of diverse communities in the City’s historical record is an important way to create a sense of belonging, and promote recognition of the diverse roots of the City.

Staff recommend commemoration and acknowledgement of the Komagata Maru incident through recognizing Komagata Maru Remembrance Day and installation of interpretive signage. The naming of new public streets happens very rarely in Burnaby, and Council has consistently declined previous requests to re-name streets, largely due to the hardship re-addressing presents to property owners. When naming civic assets, Council and its Committees have selected names that reflect a sustained and significant contribution to Burnaby by the namesake.

As the Komagata Maru incident did not take place in Burnaby, but impacted Burnaby residents, commemoration and acknowledgement of this important event in Burnaby should include recognition of the historical presence of South Asian community members in the community, and the impact of discriminatory policies on their lived experiences.

It is recommended that the interpretive sign be located in a park adjacent to Burrard Inlet in North Burnaby, as this was the area where most early South Asian residents lived in Burnaby. Burrard Inlet was also the location where the ship was detained, therefore creating a strong contextual relationship between the sign and both the location of the incident and the home of Burnaby’s earliest South Asian community members. The content of the sign would contextualize the Komagata Maru incident within the history of South Asian migration to British Columbia, and share stories of early South Asian residents in Burnaby.

Further, it is recommended that Council issue a proclamation in May 2021 declaring May 23 Komagata Maru Remembrance Day in Burnaby.

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## 5.0 CONCLUSION

This report responds to a request made from the Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society for the City of Burnaby to recognize and commemorate the significance of the Komagata Maru incident. It recommends that Council issue a proclamation in May 2021 to mark Komagata Maru Remembrance Day, and support installation of an interpretive sign nearby the shore of Burrard Inlet in Burnaby to raise public awareness of the significance of the Komagata Maru incident and the historical presence of South Asian community members in Burnaby. It is further recommended that copies of the report be forwarded to the Executive Committee of Council, the Community Heritage Commission, the Parks, Recreation and Culture Commission, and to Mr. Raj Singh Toor of the Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society.



E.W. Kozak, Director  
PLANNING AND BUILDING



Dave Ellenwood, Director  
PARKS, RECREATION AND  
CULTURAL SERVICES

LC:sa

cc: Director Corporate Services  
City Clerk