

Social Justice in Suburbia

East Contra Costa Needs Regional Resources

By Alex Schafran and Chris Schildt

For three years running, poverty has been rising and median income declining. The latest U.S. Census report paints a dire picture of the state of the working family today. Yet, as Bay Area social justice advocates chart out their next moves, they must recognize that the geography of race and class has shifted. Big things are happening in outer-ring communities like eastern Contra Costa County—a.k.a. East County—and the region needs to pay attention.

The Changing Landscape of Race and Class

In his landmark book about race and class in Oakland and the East Bay, Robert Self describes the suburbs surrounding Oakland as the “white noose.”¹ The line between predominantly black East Oakland and almost exclusively white San Leandro was well known in the country and helped to reinforce the common perception of “white” suburbs and “black” cities. But in the Bay Area, which has long been multiracial, with a complicated and spread out geography, this was never completely the case. Yet, it has been a fact of life for African Americans to be confined to a handful of cities at the core of the Bay—namely, Richmond, Oakland, San Francisco, and East Palo Alto.

Over the past generation, this geography has been changing. The Bay Area’s low-income and communities of color are no longer concentrated exclusively in inner core cities. They have been moving in large numbers to the outer suburbs—most notably, to the eastern Contra Costa County communities of Bay Point, Pittsburg, Antioch, Oakley, and Brentwood. Today, over half of East County’s 250,000 residents are African American, Latino, Filipino, or East Asian.

For new immigrants, as well as longtime residents, East County is a place of both opportunity and struggle. Many were able to become first-time homeowners by taking advantage of East County’s relatively affordable housing stock. But rampant predatory lending practices that targeted buyers of color led to skyrocketing mortgage payments and declining home

values that put East County at the epicenter of the national foreclosure crisis. In Brentwood, nearly 2 percent of the homes faced foreclosure last August.²

As the housing industry slump spread to other parts of the economy, increased unemployment put further pressure on East County families. Even with the recession “officially” over, East County continues to suffer from some of the highest unemployment rates in the Bay Area. Pittsburg’s unemployment rate was 17 percent last July and overall unemployment was nearly 14 percent for East County.³ To make matters worse, the USS-POSCO steel plant in Pittsburg—one of the largest employers in the area—has announced a partial closing this winter, threatening the livelihood of over 700 workers. According to Oakley resident and local community organizer Nancy Marquez, the combined impact of foreclosure and unemployment has been particularly devastating for African American and Latino families.

Fight for Social Justice Goes Suburban

The streets of East County may not remind anyone of Cairo’s Tahrir Square, but activists and a small but vibrant social justice community have been diligently working in the suburban terrain not normally associated with social activism. What is truly notable about the current level of activism is that the organizers are not going it alone. They are forming different, often interlocking partnerships for different issues at the county, regional, state, and national levels and working with everyone, from local govern-



ments to major hospital chains.

Groups, such as the Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO) and the Alliance for Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), have been building coalitions and campaigns to target issues at the local and regional levels. ACCE is part of the East County Environmental Justice Collaborative—a partnership between La Clinica de la Raza and the Contra Costa Health Department—which has worked on everything from clean water to speed bumps, with a focus on the low-income unincorporated area of Bay Point. La Clinica has been a local partner of the regional Great Communities Collaborative (GCC), a Bay Area regional effort to link transportation with affordable housing and socially just land use planning around transit stations. And CCISCO has successfully partnered with GCC and La Clinica to bring a new low-income health clinic to the fast growing city of Oakley.

The idea for a health clinic came from organizer Marquez and some youth members of CCISCO's Oakley Local Organizing Committee when they found out that 40 percent of their church members were uninsured. The county had been considering a school-based clinic to meet the growing demand for low-income health services. "But none of it was ever far east enough for people to benefit," says Marquez. So, they took matters into their own hands—building relationships with local health providers, such as John Muir, Sutter Delta, Kaiser Permanente, and La Clinica. They also got critical support from the City of Oakley, which stepped in to guarantee the lease for the clinic in 2010, thus adding bricks and mortar to the plan. Remarkably, the campaign was conducted through the worst years of the foreclosure crisis when

organizational resources were simultaneously needed for anti-foreclosure work at multiple levels.

Forming Alliances for a New American Majority

CCISCO and ACCE are partners with their parent organizations and groups—such as the National People's Action, the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Right to the City Alliance—in the New Bottom Line coalition efforts to link the foreclosure crisis to a broader conversation about the economic structure of rising inequality in America. They are all part of what CCISCO Director Adam Kruggel calls, "Alliances for a whole new American majority." They have been involved in protests in Oakland and San Francisco and local rallies that have garnered national attention and appearances in Antioch by Jesse Jackson. Last May, a prominent pastor and CCISCO leader from Antioch was arrested at a Wells Fargo shareholder meeting—part of a regional action involving more than a dozen local organizations.

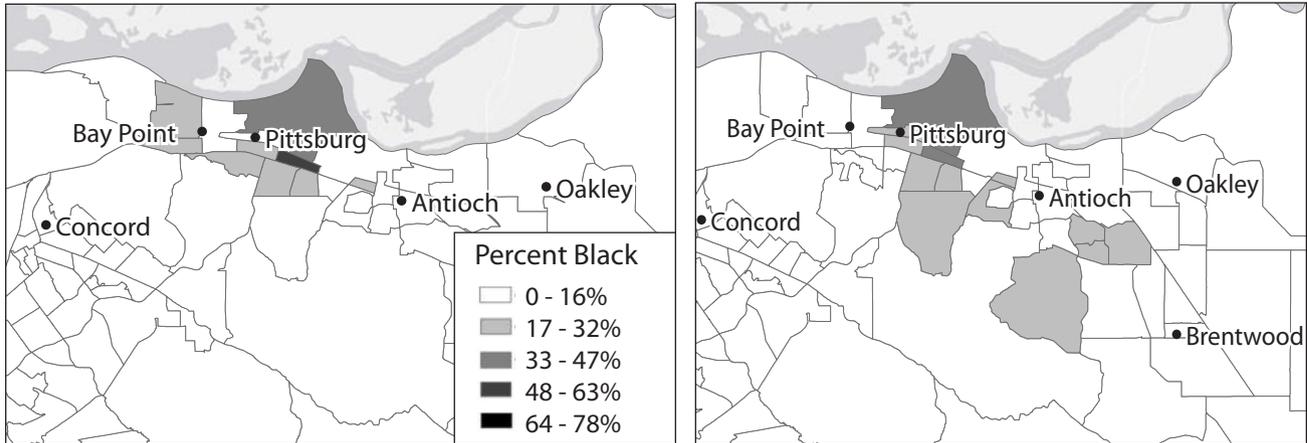
Despite their successes, East County organizers are anything but sanguine about the roadblocks they face. The growing poverty, lack of local jobs, and poor transportation network make it physically hard to get everyone together. And while its diversity is one of East County's great strengths, it also puts forth the challenges that are all too familiar to inner-city activists involved with organizing across race, class, and ethnicity.

Organizers frequently have to overcome what Kruggel calls "the Levittown mindset," especially among homeowners who blame themselves for their personal housing crises. Trying to explain the structural issues behind bad mortgages, low property values, and lack of local jobs is difficult in a place without a deep tradition of community development

Photo:

Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO) protesting Wells Fargo foreclosures.

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Percent African American Population in East County, 2000 (left) and 2010 (right). Source: U.S. Census Bureau

institutions. So, CCISCO focuses instead on basic community-building among faith communities to help people connect their personal struggles to the conditions of society as a whole.

Regional Responsibility Through Sub-Regional Coalitions

There is one challenge, however, that local organizers do not feel they should have to endure—a lack of resources and support from the region’s core. “The biggest obstacle we face is finding resources—for CCISCO, for schools, for cities, for everything,” says Marquez. Foundation support and attention from regional social justice organizations like Urban Habitat and EBASE is primarily focused on the region’s core, especially on gentrifying neighborhoods and communi-

ties still struggling with the legacy of disinvestment, redlining, and redevelopment. Even the Great Communities Collaborative recently decided to curtail its involvement in East County following the completion of certain land use campaigns they have been working on.

Much like the debate about personal responsibility in the foreclosure crisis—rather than assign regional responsibility for a crisis with deep structural and historical roots—many point to the mistakes of East County cities and homeowners for the problems they face. In truth, the East County’s hardships were not entirely self-inflicted. At the local level, anti-growth policies and rising housing costs in the Bay Area’s inner core pushed many lower-income families to the outer regions in pursuit of affordable homeownership. At the

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By the Numbers:

Urban Suburban Population Trends

By William Frey

Hispanics now outnumber blacks and represent the largest minority group in major American cities. The Hispanic share of population rose in all primary cities of the largest 100 metropolitan areas between 2000 and 2010. Across all cities in 2010, 41 percent of residents were white, 26 percent were Hispanic, and 22 percent were black.

Well over half of America’s cities are now majority non-white. Primary cities in 58 metropolitan areas were “majority minority” in 2010, up from 43 in 2000. Cities lost only

about half as many whites in the 2000s as in the 1990s, but “black flight” from cities such as Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, and Detroit accelerated in the 2000s.

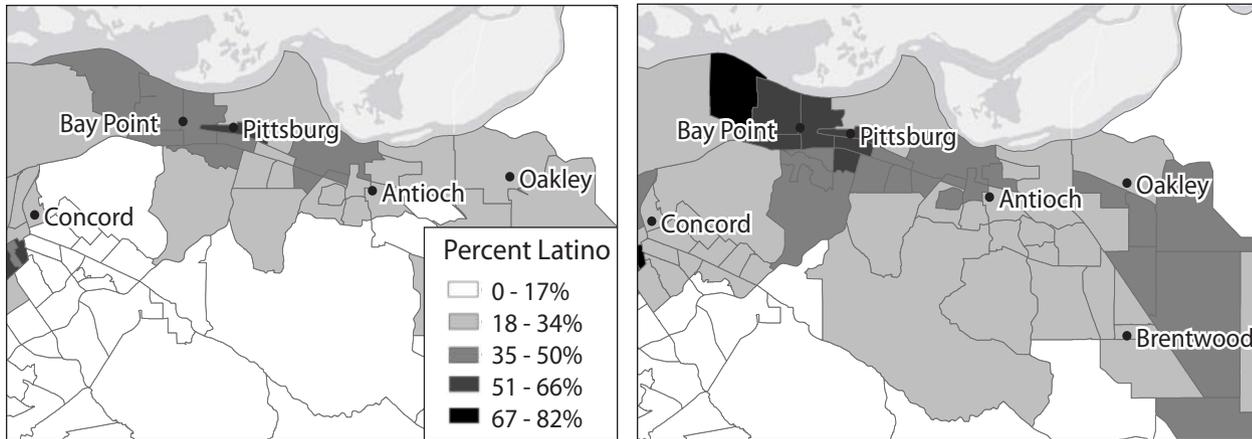
Minorities represent 35 percent of suburban residents, similar to their share of overall U.S. population. Among the 100 largest metro areas, 36 feature “melting pot” suburbs where at least 35 percent of residents are non-white. The suburbs of Houston, Las Vegas, San Francisco, and Washington, DC became majority minority in the 2000s.

More than half of all minority groups in large metro areas, including blacks, now reside in the suburbs. The share of blacks in

large metro areas living in suburbs rose from 37 percent in 1990, to 44 percent in 2000, to 51 percent in 2010. Higher shares of whites (78 percent), Asians (62 percent), and Hispanics (59 percent) in large metro areas live in suburbs.

Fast-growing exurban areas remain mostly white and depended overwhelmingly on whites for growth in the 2000s. Whites accounted for 73 percent of population growth in outlying exurban counties, well beyond their 8 percent contribution to national population growth over the same period. ■

Excerpted from Melting Pot Cities and Suburbs: Racial and Ethnic Change in Metro America in the 2000s, a Brookings Institute report.



Percent Latino Population in East County, 2000 (left) and 2010 (right). Source: U.S. Census Bureau

regional level, transportation planning failed to keep up with the East County’s growing population, 80 percent of whom commute to work. The federal government, which heavily subsidized the earlier Bay Area suburban cities, turned its back on suburban development in the last 30 years. It also changed regulations to make it easier to sell subprime mortgages and other predatory finance structures to uninformed home buyers and owners. East County cities were pretty much left to deal with the sudden influx of primarily working class African American and Latino residents by themselves.

“No one ever thought that Antioch was going to be one of the largest cities in the county. Yet, we don’t have the same voice as Richmond and Concord,” says Councilmember Mary Rocha. “Everyone points the finger at us, but why can’t we get the same opportunities like the rest of them had?”

Bay Area Take Note, East County is Here to Stay

East County has an active and ambitious but under-resourced activist community that has to largely fend for itself. Moving beyond the current situation requires concrete steps at the East County and regional levels.

Regional foundations, think tanks, intermediaries, associations, coalitions, and social justice networks need to see East County as an integral part of the Bay Area that is fundamental to the question of social and spatial justice over the next decade. There needs to be a broader commitment to working diligently on this critical frontier of suburban struggle, as well as finding the necessary funds and resources for it.

Regional organizations that engage in advocacy in the East County must work to build the deep and lasting relationships needed to support local community leadership. They must move forward a serious social equity agenda, rather than taking a campaign-by-campaign approach. These lessons have been learned repeatedly in Oakland and Richmond and must not be forgotten in the East County.

Moving out of the foreclosure crisis and combating poverty, underfunded schools, and significant fiscal challenges requires a major investment in the economy and transportation network of the area that no single actor can manage on their own. Historical divisions between the East County and the rest of the region, and divisions between social justice activists and elected officials have to be overcome to create a new, broad-based coalition to push for regional, state, and national investment in the East County’s future.

History could have been written differently if critical thought and investment had gone into managing density, accessibility, and transportation in the region’s core. East County cities might not have had to cope with such rapid growth. But as things stand today, the East County is home to over a quarter million people of all incomes and ethnicities—many of them transplants from the urban core. It’s high time the Bay Area took regional responsibility. ■

Endnotes

1. Self, Robert, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, Princeton University Press, 2005.
2. Data from RealtyTrac.
3. Data from U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics. (Note: Unemployment rates are not seasonally adjusted.)

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