

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

WHERE WE LIVE

El Cerrito maintains its attractive aspects

By Barbara E. Hernandez

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

06/15/2007



Homes with a view are a feature of the hillside neighborhoods in El Cerrito, Calif.

EL CERRITO -- Started as a refugee camp for those fleeing the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the small town of Rust had a bigger future, which started with a name change in 1917 to the more genteel-sounding El Cerrito.

El Cerrito, in western Contra Costa County, is ringed by the communities of Albany, Kensington, Berkeley and Richmond, and has more in common with the Interstate 80 Alameda County corridor than the rest of Contra Costa County.

According to Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, the city also has the record of the most progressive fiscal voting in the county.

"El Cerrito shares more in common with Berkeley than Walnut Creek," he said. "It shares both its views and politics and smaller homes on smaller lots."

With a population of 23,194, El Cerrito has claimed one of the tightest housing markets in the county, made more attractive by its two BART stations, starter homes for less than \$500,000 and the same three-bridge views found in the nearby Berkeley and Oakland hills.

"We're close to the 'City', we're close to Berkeley, we're in the inner ring of the Bay Area," said City Councilwoman Janet Abelson. "We're not in outer suburbia like Walnut Creek or Antioch, but it doesn't take long to get to those places from here."

Insiders' view

Sil Addiego, 64, came to El Cerrito when he was 12. The city's hills were undeveloped and a movie theater enveloped all of El Cerrito Plaza.

"My wife's family built a house in the hills and it seemed like they were moving out to the country," he said. "There were so few homes up there at the time."

Abelson, who bought her home in south El Cerrito for \$37,500 in the 1970s, said the city really started to grow in the past 10 years, when she noticed more families filling the homes emptied by retirees or empty nesters.

"What's happening now is that people are moving, either through death or to a different type of living arrangement," she said.

As a result, more younger families are snapping up the homes, creating a large influx of children.

"They have to keep enlarging our preschool program to fulfill the needs of the community," she said. "If you had talked to me five years ago, this would not have been the case."

Property taxes, stalled by Proposition 13 and old purchase prices, have also gone up, giving the city more money to increase amenities and infrastructure. The city's prospective budget rose from \$8.3 million in fiscal year 2004-05 to a projected \$11.1 million for 2007-08.

Asal Makoui, 25, bought her three-bedroom, two-bath home in El Cerrito six months ago after renting there.

"I liked El Cerrito because it's close to San Francisco, but it doesn't have the craziness of the city," she said.

She thought Berkeley homes were expensive and older, and parking was difficult. Makoui, a loan officer who constantly drives around the East Bay, said El Cerrito's central location and better circulation made the area more attractive. She and her sister, a Berkeley student, share the \$580,000 home.

Resident Susan Wittenberg, 65, said El Cerrito's views and affordability make it an attractive place to live, but the downside is a lack of culture compared with Berkeley and Oakland.

"Culturally and from a shopping standpoint, there's little going for it," she said. "But it does have an enormous amount of parks and has an excellent recreation department."

The 3.9-square-mile city has more than 125 acres of parks and green space. And those looking for cultural events can make the short trip to Berkeley or San Francisco, she said.

Housing stock

Housing ranges from starter homes in the flatlands of El Cerrito to higher-priced and bigger homes in the hills with "three-bridge views."

Addiego, a real estate broker with Coldwell Banker Bartels Realtors in El Cerrito, said that both younger families and older people are coming into his office. Younger families come for the

relative bargains and the city's proximity to two BART stations, something that also appeals to older populations.

"The schools are pretty good and getting better," Addiego said. "And you can walk to El Cerrito Plaza for shopping."

Addiego said that the median home price is about \$600,000, and homes sell within two or three weeks of their listing date.

Recently on Realtor.com, asking prices for 39 single-family homes in El Cerrito ranged from \$435,000 for a two-bedroom, one-bath, 1,106-square-foot home on 0.11 acres to \$1.9 million for a seven-bedroom, six-bath home on .17 acres in the hills. The median asking price was \$659,000.