

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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## Homes sit empty across East Bay

By Hannah Dreier and Matt O'Brien  
Contra Costa Times

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BRENTWOOD -- Two years after moving out, Kevin Chandler still drives by the house where he expected to raise his children to see how high the weeds have grown out front and check for vandalism.

He and his wife moved to Brentwood from Livermore in 2002, excited to buy a home large enough to accommodate their growing family. In 2009, however, both husband and wife lost their jobs. No longer able to make their mortgage payments and facing bankruptcy, the family of six moved in with relatives in neighboring Discovery Bay.

Today, the house remains empty -- one of the more than 62,000 homes in the East Bay driving vacancy rates to record highs. According to recently released census data, the percentage of empty homes in Contra Costa and Alameda counties has doubled in the past decade, jumping to more than 6 percent.

Many of the Contra Costa cities that grew the fastest in the lead-up to the housing crash are now littered with the highest percentages of empty homes.

The cities of San Pablo and Richmond have the highest overall vacancy rates in Contra Costa -- 8.5 and 8.2 percent, respectively. Pittsburg, Antioch and the rest of East Contra Costa follow close behind.

Vacancies in East County cities increased by 200 to 550 percent from 2000 to 2010.

Nearly one in five houses in Karen Mann's upscale Discovery Bay neighborhood sits empty. She can see three of them from her front porch.

The effect is depressing, she says, but

mostly she worries for her friends who are losing their homes.

"It's a huge emotional thing," she said. "They're strung out, and they don't feel like they've provided for their family."

The census figures don't reveal whether vacant homes are rentals, vacation houses or bank properties, but experts and anecdotal evidence suggest that the foreclosure crisis has driven the upswing.

Viktor Manrique is a Realtor in Hercules and Pinole, where the percentages of vacant homes has

roughly tripled in the past decade.

"Some of the homes are empty for as long as two years," he said. "What we keep hearing is the investor is unwilling to accept what the current market is for that home."

Manrique is frustrated that the homes continue to sit empty while he manages a waiting list of would-be renters.

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"A lot of investors say no, I'm not going to rent it, I'm going to sit on it for a while."

In the West Oakland neighborhoods that lie just south of Interstate 580, about one in four homes is vacant. On a block of Adeline Street, the entrance to a foreclosed apartment building is cluttered by a pile of unread newspapers and an abandoned Christmas tree with dried, yellow pine needles. A sign says the building is up for auction.

Homeowner Chris Lopez said more houses became abandoned over the past five years as residents fled crime or their homes were foreclosed.

"Some people lost houses to the economy. They just left it," said Lopez, a resident since 1989.

Betty Wisdom can see at least three or four empty homes from her driveway on Linden Street. When she moved there seven years ago, all of them were filled.

"The economy is what's putting people out," Wisdom said. "A lot of people can't pay the rent."

A renter could get far more space for less money in the suburbs, she said.

"They're all moving out. I don't blame them," Wisdom said. "I'm thinking about moving to Fairfield myself."

Like officials in East Contra Costa and elsewhere, Oakland Councilwoman Desley Brooks says that the empty houses are dragging down values and limiting property tax revenue at a time when the city can least afford it.

"There is also some comfort in living in a neighborhood where there are people on either side of you," Brooks said, recalling the case of an elderly woman who called her office scared that the

abandoned homes around her had attracted crime.

Brooks can relate. At the peak of the foreclosure crisis, she was the only person living on one end of her Maxwell Park block in East Oakland.

While every city experienced a jump in vacancies, the change has been least dramatic in affluent communities with stable populations such as the Tri-Valley area, Lamorinda and the city of Alameda.

Vacancy rates soared in the 1-square-mile city of Emeryville and the neighborhood surrounding the Union City BART, but officials say this is likely because of several new apartment complexes that went in about the time that the census was taken and have since been occupied.

Officials from East and West Contra Costa say they do not expect vacancies to drop to the low point of 2000 any time soon.

The empty homes in Richmond have created a "crisis situation," said Tim Higaes, Richmond's code enforcement manager. He has helped lead a regional effort to crack down on banks that neglect their properties.

In nearby Montalvin Manor, longtime resident Bob Van Bibber patrols his neighborhood daily for abandoned homes that he might be able to protect from damage. The houses he discovers run the gamut from basically untouched to completely flooded or filled with trash.

"What's hurting this area is people came out here with a lot of hopes, and a lot of them had to walk away from their homes," he said. "I don't think it will get better for a while yet."

Some West Oakland residents are more optimistic.

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Victorians with scalloped siding and other ornate features sit vacant, their doors and windows boarded up.

"Why are they abandoned? They're just sitting there, when you could get \$1,200 or \$1,600 month's rent for any of these houses," said Michael Sommers, pointing to a row of empty homes on 30th Street, some of which are bank-owned. Sommers bought and fixed up a nearby house in 2007.

"It's actually occupied to a much greater extent than it was three years ago," said Sommers, who was attracted to the area because of its vibrant arts community.

As for Chandler in Discovery Bay, he is not sure that he would move back into his old Brentwood home even if the bank cut him a deal.

"We would have to do so much work on the house because it's been vacant," he said. "I don't know if we could actually afford it."

**Contact Hannah Dreier at 925-779-7174.**  
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