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Census: East Bay cities see huge influx of Latinos

By Matt O'Brien
Contra Costa Times

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SAN PABLO -- Nearly a quarter of Contra Costa County residents and about 34 percent of the county's children are Latino, according to 2010 census figures, evidence of an ongoing shift in the region's ethnic makeup.

The change happened fastest in the former farm towns of the outer East Bay, and coincided with a growth in the total population there. It reached a tipping point on the other side of the county in Richmond and San Pablo.

"We had been expecting there would have been an increase in the Latino population," San Pablo Vice Mayor Cecilia Valdez said. "We see that in our festivals, our events, our schools."

San Pablo now has a Latino majority, at 56.5 percent, a Latino majority on its City Council, a quarterly city newsletter in Spanish and English, and other services reflective of a community where most people speak Spanish at home.

"We are here representing the whole community," Valdez said. "We need to see what the needs are, and try to fill them."

In neighboring Richmond, where the total population reached 103,701 people, Latinos are now 39.5 percent of the population. Latinos in the

past decade surpassed the black population, which had been the largest group since the 1970s.

The Latino population in the young city of Oakley swelled from 25 to 35 percent in the past decade, the most dramatic change of any East Bay city.

Yoli Cortes, who sells piñatas and quinceañera favors at a gift shop on Oakley's

Main Street, moved here from Oakland in 2001.

"The houses are bigger here," she said in Spanish. "In Oakland, they were smaller, older and also more expensive."

Cortes and her eight siblings settled in Oakland after emigrating from Mexico City in the 1980s, but decided to move together to East Contra Costa to raise their families.

"When our friends saw that we were coming out here, they all started coming, too," Cortes said.

The Latino population grew in almost every Bay Area city, but it declined in two of the region's best-known Latino neighborhoods: San Francisco's Mission district, which experienced an influx of non-Latino whites, and the Fruitvale district of Oakland, where the census reports a decline in the total population.

But many of the amenities that once made those districts special -- shops selling Latin American goods and fresh produce; Mexican and Central American restaurants; cultural centers promoting music, dance and networking; and language-appropriate social services -- are also now more commonplace across the cities and suburbs of the East Bay.

On the 23rd Street business corridor that crosses

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through Richmond and San Pablo, Camilo Alberto is opening a new Peruvian-Salvadoran restaurant this week called El Chalateco. He expects a lot of Latino customers, but could not have imagined such a profound change when he was one of the only Latino students in his local middle school in the early 1990s.

Staff writers Hannah Dreier, Lisa Vorderbrueggen and Paul Thissen contributed to this report.

Unincorporated areas have experienced some of the most significant changes: the Latino population is 62.6 percent in Montalvin Manor, 61.8 percent in Rollingwood, 54.9 percent in Bay Point and 50.1 percent in North Richmond. In the county's biggest city, Concord, the Latino population is 30.6 percent.

The U.S. Census Bureau does not consider Hispanic or Latino to be a racial category. A person can identify as Latino, but also be white, black, Asian or American Indian.

Concord has about 10,000 more Latinos than a decade ago, and its non-Latino white population dropped by 15,000 people.

Mayor Laura Hoffmeister said the increasing diversity in her city comes as the world is becoming more interconnected, with better mobility for individuals and more global connections through technology.

"Society globally has changed and become more diverse," Hoffmeister said. "We're just a microcosm of that."

She pointed out that Concord's founders, Don Salvio Pacheco, Don Fernando Pacheco and Don Francisco Galindo, were Latino.

"America is just an ongoing ebb and flow of multiculturalism and it just depends on what snapshot of time you take," she said.

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