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New reality: East County getting more diverse

By Federal Glover
For the Contra Costa Times

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The preliminary demographic data the Census Bureau released last week shows us, by the numbers, what many of us already suspected or knew about anecdotally: East Contra Costa is in the midst of dramatic change.

I've written here numerous times about the changes that are impacting every facet of life in our part of the world.

The eastern portion of Contra Costa County is one of the fastest growing areas in the Bay Area according to new figures released by the U.S. Census on March 8. East County is one of the most dynamic growth areas in the state.

At the same time, the area once dominated by farmers from the Midwest and descendants of immigrants from Portugal and Italy is starting to look like the rest of the state as more Americans of Asian, Latino and African descent move to the cities of Pittsburg, Antioch, Oakley and Brentwood. In the communities of Bay Point, Pittsburg and Antioch, no ethnic group is the majority.

- Brentwood leads the way growing from a semirural town of 23,532 to a bustling suburb of 51,481 -- a 120.9 percent leap.
- Oakley followed with a 38.3 percent growth rate. The fledgling city grew from 25,619 to 35,824.
- Pittsburg, which is approaching build-out, still found room for 6,495 new residents. It

grew from 56,769 to 63,264, a growth rate of 11.4 percent.

- Antioch, the area's largest city and the county's second largest city, grew 13.1 percent by adding almost 12,000 new residents from 90, 532 to 102,372. If not for the foreclosure crisis, Antioch's growth could have been substantially greater. To be sure, all this growth won't be without its problems. You can look at the situation as a glass half-empty or a glass half-full. I tend to be see the latter. Half-empty looks at the negative, which translates to more crowding, more traffic and more tension among the diverse groups of people. Half-full means the door is open to more business opportunities, a greater talent pool, new ideas, new cultures and -- for someone who loves to try new things -- new cuisines. The new numbers indicate that like the rest of the state, we are experiencing a marked increase in the Asian and Latino populations. Unlike the rest of the Bay Area, East County also shows more African-Americans moving to the area. People are coming here for the same reasons that attracted many of their predecessors: affordable housing, better housing, newer schools and a safer environment. The new census numbers will be used by the county to redraw the districts represented by the five supervisors. With the high growth in East Contra Costa, it may mean that the districts represented by me and by District 3 Supervisor Mary Piepho, who represents Brentwood and Knightsen, Byron and Discovery Bay along with portions of the San Ramon Valley, may face contraction since all the districts are supposed to be roughly equal in population. From my perspective, the district will become interesting. The diversity is not only in terms of ethnicity or race, it will most likely mean I will have a broader variety

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of viewpoints and voices to draw from, and their wider range of experiences will contribute to East County's treasure trove of ideas. I don't see that as a problem. I see that as a valuable resource. The growing diversity in District 5 is exactly what America is all about. It is what makes us strong as a country and unique among nations. I hope that same dynamic will carry over locally by strengthening our communities. I see that strength in the scores of volunteers who help clean up Antioch neighborhoods or plan the CornFest or join Habitat for Humanity to build new homes. I see it when Bay Point residents say they are sick and tired of gang graffiti and begin painting over the street vandalism. I see it at the town halls and forums where people take time out of their evening or weekend to come up with solutions for local problems. I see it in the soccer leagues and Little League where parents help out and make sure their kids are involved in safe and acceptable activities. I see it at the municipal advisory councils and the city councils where ordinary people seek solutions for their communities. The numbers might make some uneasy. Change is always difficult. The difficult economy doesn't make it easier. The reality is that we can never return to the way we were, but we -- along with input from our new neighbors -- can still help shape the future and the communities we want. Federal Glover is the county supervisor for District 5. Reach him at dist5@bos.cccounty.us.

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