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Pittsburg is Contra Costa's biggest melting pot

By Hannah Dreier
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 03/18/2011 04:04:17 PM PDT

PITTSBURG -- Two strangers bumping into each other in some parts of this city have more than an 85 percent chance of belonging to different racial groups, the 2010 census reveals.

This is just fine with Yemen-born Oscar Saleh, who has watched the ethnic makeup of the customers coming into his corner grocery store near City Park become ever more varied over the past two decades.

"If there was only one race, it wouldn't look right to me," he said.

This neighborhood, bounded by North Parkside Drive and Power Avenue, is the most ethnically diverse census tract in Contra Costa County. When Parkside Elementary School lets out, a mix of Latino, white and black children spill onto 17th Street.

Javier Vital, 19, points to the pastel-colored '50-era tract homes opposite his own to illustrate a point.

"Latin, black, black, white, Latin, Chinese," he says. "It's a good community."

Pittsburg is one of the 10 most diverse cities in the state, according to a diversity index devised by USA Today. Everyone is a minority, including whites.

Of the city's inhabitants, 42 percent are Latino, 20

percent are non-Latino white, 17 percent are black, and 15 percent are Asian.

And while many parts of the Bay Area are ethnically diverse, people here seem more likely to live side-by-side.

Isabella Villas said the many cultures add spice to her Rose Ann Avenue block.

"We're all on a 'hello' basis," she said. "It's fun

in the summer when everyone sits on their porch listening to their music -- Mexican, country western, rap."

The second most diverse neighborhood in the county lies a couple miles to the west, at the Pittsburg/Bay Point border. On West Siino Avenue, Brannon Sellers leans on a chain-link fence in front of the blue frame house that was home to both his father and grandfather.

"It seems like it's been the same people for years," he said.

Pittsburg has historically attracted a diverse population because its housing is among the cheapest in East Contra Costa, Councilman Ben Johnson said, and the city's relatively small geographic size has forced people from different backgrounds to live in proximity.

But he questions how integrated the town really is. Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. observed that the most segregated hour in America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning. For Johnson, not much has changed.

"If you look at it, Asians go to Asian churches, blacks go to black churches," he said. "They're still separate, but they all get along."

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Steve Koenig, a white transplant from Walnut Creek, seems more excited about the diversity than most.

"When you see people living next door to each other and functioning, well maybe it's emblematic of how the whole world should be," said Koenig, who moved here for the affordable housing and proximity to Highway 4.

As he spoke, a black man out house-hunting pulled up to ask him about safety and noise in the neighborhood.

Residents say these kinds of concerns most affect the experience of where they live, though the diversity is nice.

"I see a lot of whites, blacks and Hispanics," Richmond transplant Boderick Posey said. "Everyone is friendly. I like it here because it's quiet and peaceful -- a good place for my grandson."

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