

ISSUE DATE: 01/17/06

From 'Iowa By The Sea' To 'International City'

A Look At Long Beach's Changing Demographics With Former Advanced Planning Officer

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The Iowa Picnic used to be a big draw. Held every year since 1900 in the city once nicknamed "Iowa By The Sea," the annual event typically attracted tens of thousands of the transplanted Midwesterners who had had the good sense to leave behind cornfields and bitter winter winds in favor of sandy beaches and gentle ocean breezes.

Drop by Recreation Park at the appointed date and time nowadays, however, and you'll probably find that more of the families gathered around the grills and picnic tables trace their roots back to Latin America than to Middle America. Sure, a few dozen Iowans still show up, but their numbers are rapidly dwindling.

The International City's Hispanic population, on the other hand, is growing. So much so, in fact, that Jack Humphrey, former advanced planning officer for the City of Long Beach, predicts that the next U.S. Census will likely find the ethnic group to constitute more than 50 percent of the local population.

"By 2010, it's quite likely – in my estimation – that the majority population in Long Beach is going to be Latino," says Humphrey, who retired from the city in 2002. Now the principal of Diversa Consulting, Humphrey continues to analyze demographic trends in the greater Long Beach area for a variety of clients. In addition to statistics from the two most recent U.S. Censuses, Humphrey has analyzed 2004 Los Angeles County demographic information by census tract that demonstrates consistent trends toward shifts in race and ethnicity.

At the time of the 1990 Census, for instance, 49.5 percent of Long Beach's population was white. Hispanics were then the second-largest group at 23.6 percent, followed by blacks at 13.2 percent and Asians and Pacific Islanders at 12.9 percent. By the time the 2000 Census rolled around, however, the city's white population had dropped by 16.4 percent. Over the same 10-year period, the Hispanic population grew by 12.2 percent to take the lead, 35.8 percent to 33.1 percent. The percentages of the population made up of blacks and Asians and Pacific Islanders also increased, to 14.5 percent and 13.1 percent, respectively.

Those percentages reflect the ethnic makeup of the 461,522 residents the International City had in 2000, but not, Humphrey points out, of the nine people who represent them on the Long Beach City Council. Seven of its members – or roughly 78 percent – are white.

That's indicative, Humphrey says, of the continuing political influence of the first of the two major waves of migrants who've shaped Long Beach during the course of the 20th Century. Arriving on the city's shores between 1941 and 1965, the first wave was composed primarily of whites from the Midwest, but also a large number of blacks from the South.

"It was a very unusual event demographically, because normally a city grows by increments, and it's often sort of a mix of people coming in," Humphrey says. "But here you have a very large portion of Long Beach . . . that was developed and settled within a very short period of time by people who were

very similar in age, in background, in their vision of life in California. And as a result, we found that as these residents aged, they formed a sort of power structure, if you will. They're the ones who vote, they're the ones who have the money now, although they're beginning to die off and disappear, simply by the fact that it's now been 50 years since many of them came here."

The second major wave, the one that may eventually wash away that older power structure, occurred roughly between 1973 and 1989 and consisted mainly of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, Southeast Asia and Pacific Islands such as Samoa and Tonga.

"These immigrants are still in the process of acculturation, and because they were the new, young population and the white population was now an elderly population, it's been the Latinos, in particular, that have been driving population growth in Long Beach," Humphrey says. "But they have not yet become acculturated to the point where they're active in politics . . . so you have this curious situation where 'first wave' remnants are still in control, if you look at the city council.

"You see one African American, you see one Latina, the rest are all white and fairly affluent, and yet whites form only about a third of the population in Long Beach. So clearly, the city council, just on the basis of ethnicity, is not representative of the population of Long Beach," he says. "Because Latinos and Asians do not vote in significant numbers and are not politically active, they've not yet asserted their influence on the city council. That will come."

'Attitudes Have To Change'

Humphrey believes that such a departure from the "first wave" mentality may be crucial to addressing the critical shortage of affordable housing in the greater Long Beach area. It was the first wave of new residents, he says, who "really shaped the current face of Southern California. It's the single-family areas that stretch for miles, it's the cars using the freeways. . . . This is the California lifestyle that everybody admired."

Yet the numbers indicate that Long Beach could never build enough new single-family homes to alleviate the rampant residential overcrowding it experiences today, let alone accommodate its projected population growth over the next 25 years. The Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) predicts that Long Beach's population will increase by 14.6 percent over the next two-and-a-half decades, reaching 531,130 by 2030.

According to data from the 1990 Census, 10.9 percent of the housing units in the city at that time would have been classified as either overcrowded or extremely overcrowded as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. By 2000, 15.2 percent of the housing units in Long Beach were either crowded or overcrowded.

"During the decade of the 1990s, we had a net increase of a little over 2,500 housing units after you take away demolitions and you take away consolidation of units, but we added about 37,000 people," Humphrey says. "So, clearly, we started out behind, and we . . . have a very serious problem. And it's not likely to get better. We're projected to add somewhere between 65,000 and 70,000 people by 2030, according to the SCAG projections. You assume about 2.5 persons per household, so that means we should be building somewhere between 1,000 and 1,200 new units every year just to take care of projected growth. That says nothing about those who are already living in substandard conditions."

Founded in 1888, Long Beach is an older city with little vacant land remaining for the new residential developments – especially single-family homes.

"We can't really build single-family residences. We would need, to accommodate the growth that SCAG has projected for 2030, to add about 5 square miles to the City of Long Beach," Humphrey says. "So the only way we're going to be able to come close to meeting our housing requirements is to go to higher density housing. People here have an inordinate fear of the words 'high density' because, to them, it means either the cracker boxes which devastated the neighborhoods down around Bluff Park or it means, in their minds, something like the big public housing projects on the South Side of Chicago. But, in fact, you can have very high density and have very attractive neighborhoods."

As an example, Humphrey cites the stretch of 3rd Street between Cherry and Alamitos avenues, which is one of the highest-density residential neighborhoods in Los Angeles County. With its tree-shaded

streets and courtyard-style multifamily dwellings, however, it doesn't give that impression.

"This is such a difficult problem, finding adequate housing for our residents," Humphrey says. "And it's become a serious problem because most cities have chosen to ignore the problem because it involves difficult choices and they don't want to address these, because it means that they have to tell voters that things have to change."

A new generation of community leaders – one that more accurately reflects the cultures and ethnicities of the second major wave of immigrants – may have the fresh perspective needed to address the situation, Humphrey suggests.

"As Latinos become more active politically, then there may be a change with regards to the attitude about density, because most of the city council and most of the more powerful neighborhood associations are all in those neighborhoods that still believe that single-family residential – the old-style California of the '50s and '60s – is the ideal solution to development," Humphrey observes. "And the fact is that that can't happen, simply because there's no land to do that anymore in Long Beach. It's happening out in San Bernardino, Riverside, Ventura and northern Los Angeles counties, but it can't happen here. That means that attitudes have to change.

"And I think there are some signs that density is no longer being viewed as quite the evil it once was," he continues. "I mean, it doesn't have to be high-rise buildings. Much of Southwest Long Beach and along the shore is already 40 persons per acre. And if you extend that density out along some of the major commercial corridors in the city, places like Atlantic and perhaps Pacific avenues, certainly Long Beach Boulevard, Del Amo Boulevard and Carson Street, then you begin to absorb a good bit of the density.

"The problem is that the city has built – or will have built – almost 5,000 units, and they're bringing life back to the downtown, which is good, but those housing units are expensive and they're not meant for the people who are most desperately in need of housing," Humphrey says. "So we're getting some density, but it's not necessarily meeting the demand that most needs to be met. It's affluent empty nesters, it's young professionals or singles, and while this is not a bad thing, it doesn't meet our most critical need in the city, which is trying to find a way to reduce overcrowding and to reduce overpayment of mortgages and rent. Many families are paying over half of their income, and it's getting worse for many as interest rates continue to edge up."

As a result, people that many think of as being affluent enough to buy a home – including doctors, nurses, firefighters, police officers, teachers and college professors – are being priced out of the market. "As a result, people who traditionally were homeowners are now being forced to rent," Humphrey observes. "And rents are now beginning to escalate due to the high demand and limited availability."

Whether the city's changing demographics and an accompanying change in political leadership will result in a solution to such difficult problems remains unclear. One thing, however, is certain: It won't be any picnic. ■