

## **Rebirth of Oakland's International Boulevard alive and kicking**

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IN THE EARLY 1990's, the sign "New Chinatown" popped up near the Sun Hop Fat Supermarket on the corner of East 12th Street and 5th Avenue, just east of downtown. The sign caught the attention of residents and merchants in the area, many of whom didn't agree with the classification.

Even before the sign appeared, it was clear the area was changing. Southeast Asian immigrants from countries like Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia had begun flocking to the area, and someone put up the sign to signal change and drum up business. But some of the Latinos and other non-Asians in the neighborhood felt the area was too diverse, and thus the designation "New Chinatown" wasn't fair.

Merchants, community organizers and the city eventually brandished a different moniker for the neighborhood: the "Eastlake District."

More than 10 years later, the ethnically diverse district that runs along East 12th Street and International Boulevard southeast of Lake Merritt features many Southeast Asian restaurants and shops. La Estrellita Cafe and Bar, a vibrant Mexican restaurant located in the area since 1964, features free Latin Jazz bands on Friday nights.

"We're trying to call attention to it as a distinct place to shop and eat, kind of a hidden jewel of Oakland," said Carl Pascual, neighborhood economic development director with East Bay Asian Local Development Corp.

The new face of the Eastlake District is part of a grander revitalization that is sweeping through East Oakland, in areas near International Boulevard. Already, the Fruitvale District, southeast of Eastlake, has been transformed through city and private investments into a bustling retail corridor featuring ethnic foods, music, jewelry and clothing from various countries -- with a heavy Latino presence.

Ten years ago, the district had a good number of restaurants and retail stores, but the area suffered from several underutilized buildings, graffiti, and a lot of fly-by-night businesses.

Efforts also are under way to turn around the San Antonio District located along International between the other two districts.

Earlier this year, palm trees were planted in Eastlake to go along with street and facade improvements as part of a \$3 million streetscape improvement project funded largely by a Metropolitan Transportation Commission grant and matching city funds.

Besides restaurants and shops, Eastlake is home to a new garment manufacturer, NuSewCo Inc., that makes custom messenger bags for Nike. (See accompanying story.) Several auto body shops and Niman Ranch, the maker of organic beef and meats, also are located in the district.

### **Nimitz brought changes**

International Boulevard, also called East 14th Street, used to be a main thoroughfare of cross-town traffic in Oakland until the construction of the Nimitz Freeway (Interstate 880) in the late 1940s and 1950s dampened traffic and commerce along the street. Partly for this reason, surrounding areas declined and the street has often had a bad image, such as playing host to riots that ruined businesses after the Oakland Raiders lost the Super Bowl in 2003.

But the hope is that more communities along the boulevard will follow in the success of Oakland's Fruitvale District, located farther east along International Boulevard. Fruitvale swarms with businesses catering to the Latino community, and retail vacancies for major thoroughfares there are practically zero, according to the Unity Council, which helped spearhead the area's turnaround.

"Fruitvale is the story of the growth of the Latino community in Oakland ... and you've got businesses in that corridor that reflect that part of the neighborhood -- businesses that really cater to the Latino community, just like Eastlake, where businesses reflect the Southeast Asian community," said Fred Blackwell, site coordinator at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The foundation works to improve the economic conditions of the Eastlake area.

If you walk around Eastlake and Fruitvale, you see merchants doing business in their native languages. Blackwell describes both places as "contained communities where the inability to speak English is not a

barrier to doing well economically."

The sense of community is what brings Thanh Pham, a Vietnamese 28-year-old, back to Eastlake -- an area he lived in for about six years, before moving to Berkeley last year.

On a recent sunny afternoon, Pham sat in front of Huong Xua Cafe on East 12th Street, across from Clinton Park, with a friend, enjoying the afternoon, while other Asians at a nearby table played checkers.

While Pham is drawn to the area, he also thinks more work needs to be done.

"Even though they put up all the palm trees and everything, it's nice, but it doesn't really change the economics," he said. "When you live here, there's nothing really going on besides the same restaurant."

Pham believes the area needs more activity at night. Most places, with the exception of La Estrallita and a couple of bars, close down after 8 p.m. each night. He also said the neighborhood and other parts of Oakland are "failing" in terms of education and job opportunities. "It's just the place looks better."

### **Overcoming problems**

Eastlake, which thrives because of the support of local residents, is trying to attract more visitors like Pham to the area.

"We're trying to promote consumerism with people that don't live in the area, especially with the auto repair shops and the restaurants," said Darien Louie, managing director of Oakland Advisers, a nonprofit that assists businesses.

But Louie and others agree that parking in Eastlake remains a problem. Street sweeping rules prevent people from parking on entire sides of nearby streets in the middle of the day on certain weekdays -- and prime-time business is missed.

MDBUAlso, some feel the area still suffers from drug activity and prostitution at night. But Jose Macias, whose La Estrallita Cafe and Bar is one of the few businesses open at night, brushes aside the notion that the area is "dangerous."

"Of course, you're going to see a girl walking down the street (perhaps a prostitute), a guy that looks like he's doing drugs, but that's about it, nothing really bad," said Macias, who has been active with the Eastlake

Merchants Association since its inception. "We know the homeless that live around the area. We know the winos that live around the area. Everybody knows everybody now, but it's not bad at all."

### **San Antonio District**

Farther down International Boulevard, nestled between Eastlake and Fruitvale, sits the San Antonio District, an area city and community leaders hope will become a bit more like Eastlake and Fruitvale.

Drug dealing and prostitution plague the area at night. At the corner of International and 23rd Avenue, the heart of the once thriving commercial area, sit many vacant storefronts amidst a hodge-podge of barber shops, auto repair shops, and some buildings with windows closed up, possibly garment manufacturers.

Two new businesses recently moved onto 23rd Avenue: a cell phone store and a shop called "Smoke Em" that offers tattoos, body piercing, T-shirts, nunchuks, large knives and stun guns.

Amad Sbeih, 25, who owns the shop, said he moved to the area because the rent is cheap -- \$900 a month for his small shop.

"It's not a bad area to open," he said, citing local residents' interest in Scarface and Tupac T-shirts, along with body piercing and tattoos.

But he also said business at the 23rd Avenue store is much worse compared to similar shops he and his family own across the Bay Area. He wishes more businesses would come to the area, but he remains skeptical, since the area needs to be cleaned up.

"You know, if you come here on your first time here, you're not going to come back when you see it like this -- homeless and garbage everywhere," he said.

### **'Drill-down'**

But a host of community groups is trying to turn around the neighborhood. The San Antonio Community Development Corp. is working to build up the area's recently reactivated merchants association. There is talk of forming a business improvement district, in which landlords would pay more taxes in exchange for street cleaning services and safety patrols.

The feeling is, "that's the only way for them to make some change in terms of services that the city will not provide," said Donald Davenport,

executive director of the development corporation.

The group is working to get money for facade improvements -- like the ones used to improve the exterior and interior of La Estrallita, which in turn helped spearhead revitalization of Eastlake.

This winter, Social Compact, a Bethesda, Md.-based market analysis firm, will conduct a "drill-down" study to determine the area's economic potential.

The idea is to get a portrait of the buying power in the neighborhood to see whether area residents have enough money to support a commercial district.

In the meantime, a new laundromat is slated to be built on the corner of Foothill Boulevard and 23rd Avenue. Mi Ranchito, a supermarket catering to Latinos, has been open for several years across from the future laundromat site and has been a positive addition, boosting pedestrian traffic, area watchers says.

The Youth Employment Partnership, which provides job training for Oakland's youth, is in the midst of a \$1 million renovation on the corner of 23rd and International Boulevard.

The Eastside Arts Alliance is developing a community arts and culture center nearby.

But the area continues to suffer from a "chicken or egg" dilemma whereby new businesses are needed to reduce crime, yet crime needs to be reduced to attract new businesses, said David Kakishiba, executive director of the East Bay Asian Youth Center.

"I'm not sure if 23rd Avenue can compete at the same level (as Eastlake and Fruitvale), but I think there is much to be done there," he said.

On Nov. 13, Urban Ecology, a nonprofit that helps low-income communities redesign their neighborhoods, will unveil its comprehensive "23rd Avenue Action Plan" at Garfield Elementary School.

"The strategies pertain to bringing the place around for business. ... Neighborhood-serving businesses are part of creating an active, vibrant street life," said Robert Hickey, policy director with Urban Ecology.

In November, the City Council will vote on a plan authorizing the city's redevelopment agency to allocate \$650,000 toward streetscape

improvements in the area.

The goal is to make streets more pedestrian-friendly and install landscaping -- just like in Eastlake and Fruitvale -- to attract new businesses and liven up the district.

With such steps, the hope is that the area will no longer be referred to as the "little forgotten place between Eastlake and Fruitvale on International Boulevard."

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