



HERMAN BUSTAMANTE JR/TIMES

FELIZA SANCHEZ, who moved to her El Sobrante hills home in 1980, hopes new development in the area stops, because she fears increased commuter traffic.

Growth perplexes residents, officials

■ Despite a lack of land and strained resources, development continues in El Sobrante; some say it's too late to fix their problems

By David Ferris
TIMES STAFF WRITER

EL SOBRANTE — In Spanish, this valley's name means "the leftover."

To the 19th century Mexicans who christened El Sobrante, it meant a place no one claimed. A century and a half later, many residents of "the leftover" feel the term still applies.

Decades of annexation have placed parts of El Sobrante inside Richmond's city limits. The rest is overseen by Contra Costa County. But neither entity takes full responsibility for the area, residents and political leaders say. The result, they contend, is a hodgepodge of development and the prospect of more homes without a master plan for growth.

The booming housing market is pushing homes up the hillsides, the only land left. Seven developments, totaling 626 houses on more than 300 acres, are either under construction or bidding for approval. Those already here worry their new neighbors are living on slide-prone land and will compound a shortage of roads, parks and elementary schools.

El Sobrante is a community without a community center, a place with plenty of kids but not enough schools or parks. It has a business district that doesn't do much business and a main drag without sidewalks.



About the series

From the Bay Bridge to the Carquinez Strait, communities that were born in the early part of the century are striving to remake themselves.

Whether its city leaders mapping a commercial Renaissance or first-time homebuyers reinvigorating neighborhoods, the end result could change a whole city's character.

The Times, in an occasional series, is chronicling what the communities are dreaming of and what they may actually become.

We're interested in your thoughts about the series. Email us at wletters@cctimes.com; fax us at 510-262-2776; call us at 510-262-2770; or write to us at Evolution series, P.O. Box 100, Pinole 94564.

"The school needs fixing; the roads need fixing; ... the whole thing needs fixing," said Hope Scott, a member of the El Sobrante Municipal Advisory Council, which represents the county portion of the community.

Politicians propose bringing sense to the valley's future by temporarily halting development, and UC-Berkeley is studying ways to bring life back to downtown. But some contend it's too late to solve El Sobrante's prob-

EL SOBRANTE

Its population in 1997 was estimated at 23,588, with slightly less than half residing in unincorporated Contra Costa County. Some other statistics:

- **Average age:** 35.5 years
- **White:** 68 percent
- **Asian or Pacific Islander:** 17.4 percent
- **Black:** 10.8 percent
- **Latino (all races):** 8.3 percent
- **Foreign born:** 15.2 percent
- **Average household income:** \$64,931
- **Population in poverty:** 4.4 percent
- **College graduates:** 35.6 percent
- **High school graduates:** 86.1 percent *
- **White collar employment:** 66.2 percent *
- **Blue collar employment:** 33.8 percent
- **Mean commute time to work:** 30.4 minutes

* Persons aged 25 and older
SOURCES: U.S. Census, Claritas Inc.

lems through moratoriums or studies, and politics have killed past efforts to curtail development.

"It's a little late. You can't take back authorizations, permits and projects," said Richmond Mayor Rosemary Corbin.

Since the 1950s, El Sobrante has been a destination for commuters looking for an affordable home near San Francisco and West Contra

Growth

FROM PAGE A29

Costa residents looking to move to the hills without paying a fortune. Inhabitants praise the fine weather, its proximity to San Francisco Bay and the ridges that are set aside forever as open space.

Richmond made its first annexations here in the 1950s, a move designed to block San Pablo from moving eastward and snapping up the hillside land developers wanted. Today, most of the slopes belong to Richmond with the valley floor and the main drag through town, San Pablo Dam Road, left to the county.

The marriage of county and city has often left residents feeling that no one is in charge, residents and politicians say. One part is led by the county Board of Supervisors, in distant Martinez, and the other by Richmond, which is perceived as taking plenty in taxes but not giving much back in services.

Occasional efforts by Richmond to take over the remaining portions of the valley have met with fierce opposition by residents. Richmond City Councilman Tom Butt proposed annexation in 1997 as a way to curb development, improve services and give El Sobrante a unified local government.

County residents were adamant: They said they weren't convinced that Richmond would provide limits on development, and they worried about higher taxes and derided the city's sluggish economy and reputation for crime.

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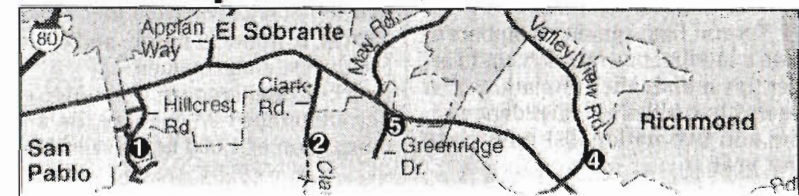


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HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS are scattered on high and low lands in the El Sobrante Valley area, which is partially in Richmond and partially in unincorporated Contra Costa County.



New developments in El Sobrante



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Some residents rejected annexation because they believed becoming a part of the city would diminish their community's quirky character.

This is a community that, for many years, had more horses than people and developed a reputation as an enclave of blue-collar homeowners. Auto-repair shops on San Pablo Dam Road are nearly as common as restaurants.

Shirley Sharp, one of the first teachers at De Anza High School when it opened in 1957, remembers that before the fields had bleachers, spectators watched football games from their horses.

"People would come here because they could do what they wanted," said Sharp, who now works as a Realtor. "They could raise chickens; they could park trailers."

As population has increased and home prices have climbed, El Sobrante's makeup has shifted. More than two-thirds of employed adults have white collar jobs, U.S. Census data shows. Some longtime residents worry that the "yuppification" of the community has begun in earnest.

"You won't get any bartenders or waitresses moving in up there," said Bill Linck, a 65-year-old carpenter and El Sobrante resident, of the new housing developments going up on the southern slopes of the valley. "You'll need a hell of an income."

Diane Adams, 55, just moved into a five-bedroom, \$325,000 home with her mother and son. She works in computers at Richmond's Kaiser hospital and said she moved to El Sobrante to get out of an apartment in Richmond and was drawn to the community by its proximity to her old home and price.

"It really is pretty. The sunsets are lovely," said Adams, surrounded by packing boxes.

The steady influx of new residents is gradually changing the ethnic composition of El Sobrante, as well. In the county portion, the white population dropped 8 percent between 1980 and 1990, while the black pop-



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DIANE ADAMS is excited about moving into her new home in El Sobrante's Hillcrest development.

lived there since he was 10.

Stop to shop?

While growth has increased the community's diversity, it has also put a pinch on roads, schools and other services. Residents say the problems have been amplified because neither the city nor county will address problems head-on.

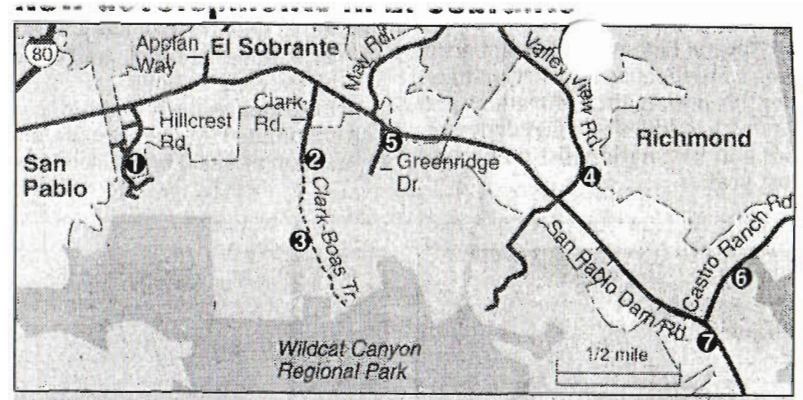
San Pablo Dam Road is jammed during rush hour because of commuters who use it as a shortcut between West and Central county. New homes will inevitably make traffic worse.

"These (new residents) are going to live in hell," said Jack Hanna, who lives across from El Sobrante Estates, a 65-house development planned near where San Pablo Dam narrows from four to two lanes.

And the commuters don't stop to shop. Locals are scared away by the difficulty in simply getting around downtown, with its rumbling traffic and lack of crosswalks and stoplights.

"A lot of times it's like you're risking your life," said Ruby Molinari, a member of the El Sobrante Municipal Advisory Council.

Those who want to resuscitate downtown are pinning their hopes on a \$40,000 study, currently under-



Development	Acres	Units	Timeline
1. Hillcrest	17	64	completed Dec. 1999
2. Clark Road	144	204	breaks ground spring 1999
3. Forest Green	82	188	too early to estimate
4. Spanish Trails	7	18	completed early 2000
5. Woodridge Terrace	8	35	completed early 2000
6. Castro Ranch	35	52	completed fall 1999
7. Mt. Pleasant	18	65	completed 2001

Source: Developers, Richmond & Contra Costa County planning departments

JON MANLOVE/STAFF



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JESUS LUMBRERAS, an employee of Golden Bear Acoustic, hammers a banister at one of the new homes in El Sobrante's Hillcrest development.

What about the children?

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The steady influx of new residents is gradually changing the ethnic composition of El Sobrante, as well. In the county portion, the white population dropped 8 percent between 1980 and 1990, while the black population climbed by 4 percent and the Asian population by 5 percent.

Ken Cheung, whose Taiwanese family owns the Bakehouse Cafe, served breakfast to a Spanish-speaking family on a recent Wednesday. Across the street is a church primarily attended by blacks and on the hill above shines the golden spire of the Sikh temple.

"We're very mixed," said Mike Wells, a 30-year-old manager at El Sobrante Schwinn Cyclery who has

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Those who want to resuscitate downtown are pinning their hopes on a \$40,000 study, currently under way by the UC Berkeley urban-studies department. The study is due to end in May. It may recommend such shopper-friendly measures as widening sidewalks, slowing down traffic, changing the layout of stores and parking lots, and adding the kinds of stores locals are likely to use.

County Supervisor John Gioia, who represents most of West Contra Costa, said he may use the study to lobby for county redevelopment funds to enact the proposals.



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What about the children?

The West Contra Costa Unified School District is certain to gain more students, but has no plans to buy more land. Four of the five elementary schools that serve El Sobrante exceed capacity, according to state guidelines. Parents complain they can't send their children to the nearest school.

"I don't know how desirable it is to put up new housing if new people aren't going to be able to have qualified schools because of the overcrowding problem," said school board member Charles Ramsey.

In El Sobrante, it's no problem locating a nature trail, but try finding a jungle gym. Hikers have Wildcat Canyon Regional Park, Kennedy Grove Regional Recreation Area and Sobrante Ridge Regional Preserve. But the only spots for tykes are tiny LaMoine Park and the playgrounds

of two local schools to be used after school hours.

Richmond officials admit that in El Sobrante, they have fallen behind state mandates of 3 acres of parks for every 1,000 residents.

Landslides are a constant worry in the steeper reaches of El Sobrante, where most new building is planned. Residents have filed lawsuits against their developers at the Quail Hill and Carriage Hills developments. Landslides near the corner of La Colina and La Cima roads destroyed 25 homes in 1983 and caused another two to be abandoned during last year's El Nino. A 188-home development called Forest Green is proposed nearby.

Developers contend their new hillside building techniques make the slopes more, not less, stable.

Solving El Sobrante's ills, however, will require a deft political hand. Momentum is building for a tempo-

rary moratorium on construction in the valley.

Gioia and Richmond City Councilman Nat Bates said they are calling for the moratorium to allow county and city planners to make a joint plan for growth. It could last two years.

The plan may be heard in the next few weeks before the Richmond City Council.

Proposals for moratoriums in El Sobrante have died twice before, once in the 1970s and again two years ago. And Richmond's Corbin contends that after the latest round of houses is built, there won't be much more space for new development.

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