

# Health of economy, residents on rise in San Pablo

By Otis R. Taylor Jr.

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Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

Teams with the San Pablo United Youth Soccer Club, fill the fields at Rumrill Park on Mon. Sept. 25, 2017, in San Pablo, Ca. San Pablo was one of eight winners of the 2017 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Culture ...  
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Rita Xavier rented a trailer in San Pablo for two decades.

When she moved there in the early '90s, the strip of San Pablo Avenue where she lived was blighted by ramshackle trailer parks, shady card rooms and unseemly bars. Back then, the 2.6-square-mile city, surrounded by Richmond, had one of the highest violent crime rates in California.

“When I first moved here, you didn’t go out on the sidewalk at night,” Xavier, 77, told me.

But now, San Pablo Avenue — and by extension the city itself — is a nationally recognized beacon of health. And the trailer park where Xavier once lived is now being developed into Plaza San Pablo, a health campus that's part of a partnership with Contra Costa County.

On Monday, the city held a groundbreaking ceremony for a new nutritional center for families with young children that the city is building just behind the West County Health Center, a county-run regional clinic that opened in 2011.

Xavier, chairwoman of San Pablo's planning commission, was one of about 40 people in attendance, and she took pictures of city leaders posing with pristine shovels in front of a mound of dirt.

People are digging San Pablo.

Earlier this month, the city was named one of eight winners of the 2017 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's culture of health prize. The foundation raises health awareness through research and grants. The culture of health prize, which includes a \$25,000 cash award, honors communities for creating opportunities for residents to live healthier lives.

San Pablo put itself in position to be a bastion of health when it made a commitment to community development several years ago.

The commitment has been backed by revenue from the San Pablo Lytton Casino, the first casino in an urban area in the state. Owned and operated by the Lytton Band of Pomo Indians, the casino began as a card room before expanding to offer slot machines and video bingo in 2005.

The casino is the city's primary source of revenue. The city receives a 7.5 percent cut of gross gambling revenue as part of a 2003 municipal services

agreement. That comes to about \$1.2 million a month, said Rich Kinney, a San Pablo council member.

“If we didn’t have that, we’d die,” Kinney said.

Looking at what’s happening in San Pablo, the money from the casino has been well spent. San Pablo is what happens when city leaders focus on improving the lives of residents.

San Pablo’s revitalization cranked up to full speed in 2010 when the council developed an ambitious work plan to provide health services, enhance public safety and encourage the economic development that would create jobs for residents.

The city sketched the vision, but it was Matt Rodriguez, the city manager for seven years, who managed the plan.

“He translated vision into reality,” said John Gioia, a Contra Costa supervisor who spoke at the groundbreaking.

According to Kinney, it was Rodriguez who figured out how best to spend revenue from the casino.

About Rodriguez, Kinney said, “He’s been really good at changing the whole direction of the city. We were one of the poorest cities in the county.”

And now it’s a model city.

Rodriguez deflected credit.

“The council and the administration have been working very well together to accomplish those goals,” he said.

Economic health walks hand in hand with physical health. In 2010, San Pablo's unemployment rate was 22 percent, according to Rodriguez. The San Pablo Economic Development Corporation, a nonprofit organization funded by the city and other revenue sources, was created in 2011 to foster workforce development and job training. Unemployment has dropped to 6.8 percent, Rodriguez said.

"It's all part of the overall plan just to enhance the community and provide the programs and services that the community really needs, and to create a better quality of life," he said.

The resources for healthy living include the San Pablo Community Center, which opened in 2013. The city-run center offers day care, as well as martial arts, dance and exercise classes. There's also a community hall, cafe, computer lab and a skate park. In 2015, Rumrill Sports Park, a city park that has turf athletic fields, a children's playground and a barbecue area, opened in an overgrown field next to long-abandoned railroad tracks.

On Monday afternoon, I walked up San Pablo Avenue with Leslay Choy, general manager of the San Pablo Economic Development Corporation. We passed the new San Pablo Library, a striking orange building that opened a month ago. She pointed out future commercial and residential developments, and she told me about the programs, from financial planning to tattoo removal, that the organization runs for the city.

To me, this is what really makes San Pablo stand out: how it treats its 30,000 residents, many of whom are Latino.

According to Choy, about 45 percent of the city's population was born outside of the United States. With such a large immigrant population, skepticism when it comes to civic engagement would be expected, especially in this political climate.

But, Choy said, residents have been taking advantage of the city's services.

Xavier, who stopped driving when she moved to San Pablo, said she feels safe getting around on public transit — and walking on San Pablo Avenue.

“As time went by, I was no longer afraid to go out on the sidewalk,” she said.

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