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Oakland's Parkway Renaissance Site of quake-toppled freeway viewed as path to redevelopment

Rick DeVecchio, Chronicle Staff Writer



OAKLAND -- A forested boulevard is replacing the scar where the Cypress Freeway collapsed in the 1989 earthquake, erasing a symbol of destruction and bad planning in West Oakland as hard-luck neighborhoods along the way buzz with land deals.

When it is linked to Emeryville and Interstate 880, the reborn mile-and-a-half-long Mandela Parkway will attract regional attention, aiding the movement not only of traffic but also of money.

Planners and developers say the four-lane divided boulevard, cutting across the Bay Area's tightest mesh of underground data-transmission lines, will draw West Oakland tighter into a technology triangle with Emeryville and San Francisco.

The theory: As those cities run out of land, the road will lead to prime business and home sites.

Work on the boulevard is scheduled to be finished by the end of next year or early 2002, when 1920s-style street lamps, benches, fountains, bike and walking trails and a welcome-to-Oakland arch will transform what is now a strip of pipe-fabrication barns and warehouses.

The parkway is a sign of new economic life in an area that has been one of the Bay Area's poorest for more than 30 years.

"What if we were to replace that junkyard with a four-story building with a cafe on the ground floor and some lofts?" San Francisco developer Bill Lightner mused as he toured a nearby stretch of industrial badlands in his classic Mercedes.

ATTRACTING BARGAIN HUNTERS

Opportunity hunters are coming. They are techies, Latinos, gays and various developers from San Francisco, San Jose and the suburbs.

They hope for access to the hidden treasure in falling-

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down Victorians, to the network of fast data lines growing under the streets as the Internet expands and to industrial boneyards seen as ripe for South of Market-like tech colonies.

An investment group that includes a San Francisco woman with \$2 million to spend has asked Oakland consultant Vincent Simmons to buy up as much property as he can get his hands on. "They said, 'Vince, we want blocks at a time,'" Simmons said.

A quieting of crime is a major draw, said Jon Freeman, a San Jose mortgage lender who picked up a three-bedroom Victorian junker a block from McClymonds High School for \$32,500.

'CRACK-CRAZY TIME' GONE

"I have a lot of friends who live there, and they're telling me most of their friends are dead or in jail," said Freeman, who owns 14 other West Oakland houses. "A lot of the boys from that crack-crazy time are gone."

Change is already visible along the parkway route from north of Jack London Square to Emeryville.

In a record deal, a Minneapolis construction company is buying a work yard from the Oakland port. The site is valuable because it is atop a buried crossroads of fiber-optic data-distribution lines. The draw: Cheap and accurate connections for tech businesses that handle large volumes of data.

A similar station near the San Francisco waterfront helped create Multimedia Gulch.

West Oakland's location makes it a nexus for fiber as it has been historically for railroads and freeways.

"That area is the single greatest value in the Bay Area, bar none," said project manager James Fey.

AT FIBER-OPTICS CROSSROADS

The new land deals are powering a promotion of West Oakland as the next frontier for tech businesses. Seeing dot-coms at the door, some developers and government leaders tout a technology business district at the fiber crossroads and another along the parkway.

"The seesaw used to be totally down on West Oakland," said Leslie Gould, the city's planning director. "It's even now."

The tilt is making for edgy politics as longtime residents deal with fears of being pushed aside.

Emeryville developer Rick Holliday, who has a contract to buy another wreck from the Loma Prieta quake, West Oakland's former Amtrak passenger depot, sees the West

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Grand Avenue strip from the new parkway to downtown Oakland as crucial in the politics of development.

He said it is roomy enough to fill with job and residential growth, providing the greatest benefit with the least amount of pain in the jostling over land.

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SOME RESIDENTS DISGRUNTLED

Members of Save West Oakland Now are feeling the pain already.

The newly formed group of longtime local residents claims that city policies to resurrect West Oakland favor newcomers. Although lenders have plentiful home loan money and are dealing more often with low- and moderate-income borrowers, the locals complain they are being left out.

“We've got so many people in the community entrenched in their problems that they can't get from A to D,” said Queen Thurston, the group's leader.

Martha Walker, 58, struggles to make it on a fixed income and warns her homeowner neighbors to hold tight against lowball offers.

“They're waiting for all these elderly people, telling them, ‘Why don't you sell your home? We'll take it as it is,’ ” Walker said.

Blacks fought for economic power in the 1960s, only to see it decline. Now, money is resurgent, but blacks are giving ground to whites and Latinos and a culture of investment.

“The people who offered the blood, sweat and tears are now on the outside looking in,” said David Glover, executive director of the Oakland Citizens Committee for Urban Renewal. “It's really a tragic turn of events.”

LEARNING HOW TO BUY

Freeman, the San Jose mortgage lender, said the gap is real.

“We're talking to people who do not believe they can buy,” he said. “Most of it is lack of knowledge. Certainly, if you want to see less of a displaced population, you put a big push into, ‘Let's teach you to buy property.’ ”

In the neighborhood where the residents group meets every Friday, the price of bare ground has tripled in six months. A development group doubled its money last year on the conversion of an abandoned school into condo lofts.

Technology companies cropping up in nearby Emeryville are laying data cable, hooking in to intercity mainline fiber in the old cross-country rail grade as smokestack-era

companies are packing up.

Developers are recycling a large chunk of the neighborhood's housing stock as a pro-investment city adds muscle in the form of law enforcement and loans and Mayor Jerry Brown goes national to seek institutional capital as an urban restorative.

SIGNS OF REDEVELOPMENT

On one street, a neighbor's flock of chickens clucks under a beat-up Victorian hoisted up on blocks.

The developer, Todd Severson of San Francisco, is restoring the house as an artful rental he hopes will appeal to the technology workers piling into Emeryville.

One block over, Nadja Kuhner, 30, of San Rafael, took a tip from her developer mother and ventured to buy a corner lot in a neighborhood that grows less weedy and drug-infested every year. The grocery co-op assistant manager is learning computer-aided design to create a home and income property for her partner and their two kids.

"I think this is a prime place for the next shopping center in Oakland," said Mike Bullio, whose nearby car junkyard has been hit by a decline in the number of amateur mechanics prowling for parts.

The city is juggling hope and fear as it works out the district's first zoning scheme in 30 years. The idea is to preserve the historic mix while protecting home values from industry encroachment and inviting investment.

GROWING LATINO PRESENCE

As industry and black residents struggle, Latinos are joining whites as a growing presence.

Ricardo Ramirez pulled off his face mask, sweat running down a cheek coated with white dust from the truck fender he had been grinding at his body shop.

Urged by his friend Jose Cartagena, he is turning over the idea of getting a home in West Oakland for the same monthly cost as his San Leandro rental.

A West Oakland homeowner, Cartagena checks the latest neighborhood closing prices in the Sunday papers before Mass at a neighborhood parish with a burgeoning Latino congregation.

A Salvadoran immigrant who makes less than \$30,000 a year as a social worker, he believes that the working poor must own property to secure a future in California.

"There's a triplex available for 149, and I'm trying to get my cousin in," Cartagena said. "What I'm pushing is buy, buy, buy."

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