

Front Porch Time Machine: Tomorrow's South Bay

By D. J. Waldie | March 4, 2015

I was asked to deliver some thematic remarks at the annual conference of the South Bay Cities Council of Governments (SBCCOG) in Carson last week. The SBCCOG is one of several councils of governments in Los Angeles County that clump up communities that have at least some geographical and structural commonality.

The COGs (as they're called) give cities a regional focus without being a form of regional government.

My brief speech doesn't need to be repeated here. Readers of these pages know my themes: the making of a "sense of place," respect for history and memory, and a certain humility before the partial victories of the past.

My portion of the southeast county wouldn't seem to have much in common with the cities of the South Bay COG. They include the communities between the Port of L.A. and LAX: Carson, El Segundo, Gardena, Hawthorne, Hermosa Beach, Inglewood, Lawndale, Lomita, Manhattan Beach, Palos Verdes Estates, Rancho Palos Verdes, Redondo Beach, Rolling Hills, Rolling Hills Estates, Torrance, and the southern tip of Council District 15 of the City of Los Angeles. These places might not seem to have all that much in common, either. What does luxe Rolling Hill Estates have to say to blue-collar Lomita?

What is most alike among them -- and most similar to most of Los Angeles County -- is a demographic transformation, already well underway, that is making a large part of my "sense of place" out of date.

Genial and somewhat self-deprecating, Professor Dowell Myers of the USC Price School of Public Policy laid out the numbers for the South Bay COG audience:

- Population growth in the South Bay has leveled off. Much slower growth is forecast than projections made by state agencies and the Southern California Association of Governments as recently as the early 2000s.
- The percentage of new immigrants in these cities (including an estimate of the undocumented) peaked in 2000. For the county overall, the new immigrant population has held steady since then at 36 percent.
- The wave of foreign-born immigration is receding. It's the children of the foreign-born who will represent the cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity of South Bay

cities in the future. They will be more settled than their parents as the county becomes increasingly native born.

- Los Angeles won't become a Latino-majority county anytime soon. Projections into 2030 forecast a "majority minority" region, with a Latino population just under 50 percent. (As recently as 2012, the Latino percentage of the county's population was projected to top 50 percent by 2020-2025).
- The percentage of school-age children in the population of the South Bay has already declined dramatically and will continue to drop.
- The percentage of adult residents -- logically -- is going up. Age disparities will be particularly acute among South Bay cities. The low percentage of youth maturing into income-earning adults will affect employers, retailers, health care providers, and city governments.

These numbers predict an older, less footloose population whose roots are here. That may benefit civic and political life one day ... but only if the children of today's immigrants get a good education. The numbers also predict a shortage of younger workers from the millennial generation. Their absence may propel even more industries out of the region.

Equally, a shortage of affordable housing for new families may drive the young adult population elsewhere. The lack of new middle-class families may depress the resale market. In the end, the two-million-dollar homes of the South Bay may end up chasing a fickle and shallow pool of foreign buyers as the formerly hot lofts of downtown become dormitories for the very old.

Faster than other regions of the county, the South Bay is maturing into something "urban-like" in function while remaining "suburban-like" in appearance. Those contrasting "likes" are making it difficult for planners and politicians to imagine what the region requires to remain (or become) a fit place to live.

Although Professor Myers didn't put the question this bluntly, I wonder how its residents are supposed to make good decisions about the future of the South Bay if their imaginative conception of it no longer reflects what the South Bay is becoming.

And how are we to imagine L.A. if it's no longer exactly L.A. anymore?

And how are we to become the Angeleños we should become. As the 2013 Myers/Pitkin report pointedly asked:

How well do Los Angeles residents recognize their mutual dependence? Certainly those of middle age may not feel as much interest in children, now that their own are grown. And these middle-aged residents are the peak earners and largest taxpayers we have. The children, for their part,

are the greatest tax beneficiaries. ... Over time everyone changes position, taking turns being economically dependent and highly productive. We should be reminded that the different stages of life are linked together in a life-cycle of roles ... Certainly, we would be well advised to recognize the implicit partnership that ties the generations together, linking interest groups and spanning ethnic or immigrant divides. We are all in this together.



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