

Seaside Is Embracing Diversity, Creating Opportunity

by Carol Lynn McKibben

"Because of its diversity [of ethnic groups], Seaside, California, has sometimes been referred to as 'Little Chicago,'" wrote Donald Thomas Clark in his 1991 book, *Monterey County Place Names, A Geographical Dictionary*. That was also written about Seaside in the 1930s, but it still holds true today. Seaside is a quintessentially diverse city fighting for a new image. Thanks to creative new strategies by City Manager Ray Corpuz and Seaside's city councilmembers, it is achieving that image.

Beginning in the 1920s, racially restrictive clauses in real estate deeds that kept particular minority groups from owning or renting property, together with less formal but equally effective customary exclusions, slowly forced Mexicans, Filipinos, and many Asians and African Americans out of Monterey proper, out of Carmel, Pebble Beach, and even Pacific Grove and into what was becoming, for many reasons, the less developed margins of the city of Monterey—the subdivision of Seaside.

Poverty and color became synonymous with Seaside in the minds of most Monterey Peninsula residents in the years between 1915 and 1940. And then Fort Ord arrived—for better and for worse.

The mixed ethnic and racial population of soldiers, veterans, and their families who arrived with the establishment of Fort Ord in 1917 and the fort's rapid expansion during the 1940s added to the ethnically and racially diverse demographic landscape of Seaside. It also added to the perception that Seaside and Fort Ord were intertwined, almost symbiotic.

The relationship was a complex mixture of positive and negative, and the August 12, 1941, issue of the *Seaside News-Graphic* reported, "The biggest breadbasket the

peninsula has ever had is Fort Ord . . . and we in [Seaside] are the nearest [to] the head of the table where that bread is coming from.”

STAGES OF CHANGE

Seaside, which incorporated in 1954, adopted the council-manager form of government and benefited from such forward-thinking city managers as Gordon Forrest, Charles McNeely, and now Ray Corpuz who have created both stability and growth despite sometimes turbulent politics.

In spite of the money brought in by its proximity to and relationship with the military base, all of the negative connotations of being a military town—violent crime, drugs, prostitution—were in place in Seaside by the time of the outbreak of World War II and only intensified in the postwar years and all the way into the 1990s. The positive aspects of community development and coalition building across racial and ethnic lines on everything from politics and culture, to social life and economic growth were overlooked by the local media and in the other communities of the Monterey Peninsula.

And then, in a few short years, the reality changed. Fort Ord ceased to function as an active training base in 1992. By 1994, the exodus of people who were closely connected to the economy of the base, including soldiers and their families, support personnel, and small-business owners, left Seaside in a state of economic, political, and social turmoil and disarray.

In addition, budget cuts at the state and federal levels that affected local governments everywhere and turned them into competitors for meager federal and state funds left Seaside struggling with altogether new economic and demographic realities. A new population of mostly immigrant Latinos streamed into Seaside in the 1990s, displacing African Americans from their traditional jobs in the service industry that had been the cornerstone of the peninsula economy.

The new Latino residents bought property in Seaside that had once been owned by African Americans, and they made their presence felt in schools and in all aspects of city life. “Is this America, baby?” one bewildered African-American community leader asked rhetorically in 2005.

Census data showed a population decline in Seaside from 38,901 in 1990 to 31,696 in 2000 and, more important, a dramatic shift in the racial and ethnic composition of Seaside’s population. Between 1990 and 2000, both the African-American population and the non-Latino white population declined by several percentage points.

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While the Latino population doubled, Asians—primarily Filipinos and Vietnamese—began leaving Seaside for Marina during this decade, but the category of “Other,” which included Pacific Islanders, increased to more than 6 percent of Seaside’s population.

DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT

The multiple changes of the 1990s meant that by 2007 Seaside was no longer a city in which non-Latino whites were the largest group and African Americans were the largest minority. By 2007, Latinos outnumbered both non-Latino whites and African Americans. In my research, I learned that the organizations that African Americans had built from the 1950s through the 1990s were no lon-

ger attracting new members in 2007. Instead of African-American, Asian, and white ethnic youth, the streets of the city were now filled with families of Latino immigrants.

The shops and restaurants of Seaside, once mainly reflective of African American, Southern white, or East Asian cultures, now included hundreds of Latino markets, restaurants, and small businesses. They catered to the new demographic of mostly Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants who made up more than one-third of the population of this city of 33,300 by 2005.

Seaside now joins other California communities that are coping with an influx of immigrants mostly from the states of Jalisco and Oaxaca in Mexico. However, in stark contrast with other cities where political tensions between African Americans and Latinos run high, Seaside seamlessly elected its first Latino mayor in 2005 and, at the same time, continued to elect both African Americans and whites to the city council and incorporate other minorities into city government.

Seasiders spent the better part of the past two decades coping with the loss of Fort Ord as an active training base, which consumed city managers, planners, community leaders, and local resources alike. Seaside aimed for a post-Fort Ord renaissance and, although the city continued to struggle with marginalization on the peninsula in the decades of the 1990s and into the new century, it is largely accomplishing its economic goals with little political fallout, which can be a model for California cities undergoing some of the same challenges.

In October 2007, I talked with Ray Corpuz, who had arrived to take on the position of city manager in 2005. According to Corpuz,

“[Seaside] was a city that was in obvious transition from a military-dependent community trying to find its place on the peninsula where a brand idea [tourism] defined Carmel, Monterey,

and Pebble Beach. Seaside was not part of that brand in the eyes of the other communities. The city wanted to move beyond this transition of not being a fully recognized partner [with the other municipalities] and [at the same time it] was struggling to find both a direction and a common vision both among the leadership of elected officials and the community at large.”

Seaside under Corpuz did something novel in 2007. It attracted development not by papering over its past or denying its new populations but by celebrating them and including them in the process of redevelopment.

Through a carefully constructed strategy of reorganization at the city government level and with community participation in all development plans, Seaside has now found itself in the throes of redevelopment and gentrification, bustling with projects ranging from golf courses, five-star resorts, conference facilities, new residential and commercial development, and plans for a mixed-use, transit-oriented urban village that is expected to transform the downtown.

Moreover, a new proposal submitted to the Seaside city council on March 20, 2008, by convention center adviser and consultant David O’Neal aims to create a 125,000-square-foot exhibition hall and convention center on former Fort Ord land, which would allow Seaside to make a unique contribution to the Monterey Peninsula business and tourism industry. At present, the Monterey Peninsula has no such venue. Its largest indoor space now seats only 500 people.

Today, Seaside looks a lot more like the resort destinations of Carmel, Pebble Beach, and Monterey than the marginalized suburb that it was forced into becoming in the middle decades of the 20th century. Unlike the other peninsula cities, however, Seaside remains a “city of color” in the best sense of the term.

Its community events and celebrations—ranging from Cinco de Mayo, the blues and jazz festivals, Sunday

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afternoon Blues in the Park, and numerous arts and cultural events that celebrate Filipinos, Pacific Islanders, and diversity itself—express Seaside’s embrace of the complexity and multiplicity of peoples, and they attract thousands of visitors each year.

ACCEPTANCE AND VISION

The 21st-century vision of Seaside is a blend of resort destination with the social, cultural, and demographic characteristics of a multicultural population. Its historic success at building coalitions across racial and ethnic lines to achieve political, social, and economic ends makes Seaside a model for other local governments currently struggling with racial tensions and conflicts.

Other communities in demographic transition from African American to Latino—communities throughout the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas and in other regions of the country—have encountered open conflict, mistrust, and even violence between Latinos and African Americans as Latinos gradually assumed majority status. Although Seaside was never a majority African American community, African Americans were the most significant population between 1945 and 1990. As a result, neighboring communities exclude them from everything ranging from development projects to regional events.

These municipalities need exactly the kind of acceptance of their neighbors that Seaside is achieving and

also, most important, the economic investment that Seaside is attracting as a result of its efforts to recreate an image that conforms to its new reality.

Seaside largely escaped the open conflict of other transitional cities because of its long tradition as a mixed-race military community that required groups to get along, and it has attracted an enviable level of investment in the past few years. How did Seaside do it?

When Ray Corpuz entered Seaside’s government, he found a city council “more open to new ideas about how to make the transition to a destination city.” He began the

Seaside History Project with the idea of creating a first-ever narrative history of the city and also creating community events about Seaside’s racial and ethnic past that highlight the accomplishments of communities of color. These projects gave residents a new sense of pride in their history and challenged the negative image of the city in the local press. Corpuz describes Seaside’s initiatives:

“We are trying to be as inclusive and transparent and [at the same time] we are raising the expectation level [of what is possible for Seaside in terms of development]. Seaside’s development priorities—the golf course resort, regional shopping center, a new downtown and urban core [are all upscale enterprises]. Multiculturalism is reflected in the way people tell us what they want. We understand that we do have a past that is about diversity. We acknowledge that by reviving and revitalizing the representation of the commissions and upscaling community events.”

Corpuz also successfully urged the council to do an overall market study, bringing diverse coalitions and interests together to focus on development in a holistic way. In doing so, no one interest group dominated and all were included. Mayor Ralph Rubio supported this new direction in creating a “greater, a newer Seaside.”

City government needed streamlining in order to accomplish its objective of working effectively to serve the

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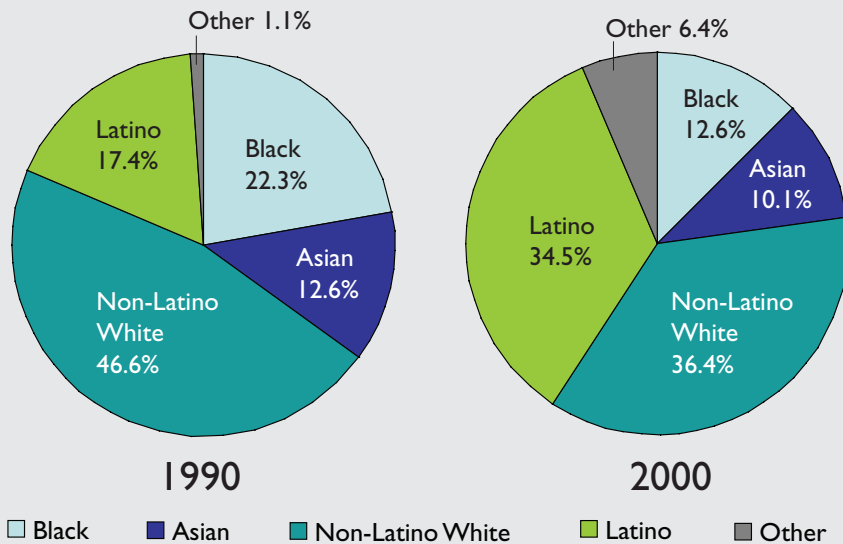
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Seaside's Racial Breakdown: 1990-2000



public efficiently. “We had good people, but we had to move to the next level,” the city manager explained. “Improving the capacity for each employee to handle the expectations of our citizens [required] training in customer service and reorganizing the city so that business systems could be coordinated and effective.”

“How people are treated, response time, ability to solve problems, interpret regulations—all have to be done with focus on the customer [the residents and investors in Seaside] and doing what is responsive to the community as a whole.”

The city, for example, offers free Spanish language classes and conversational Spanish to all of its employees. Any employee who passes the language exam or who is bilingual is eligible for an increase in pay. This sounds simple, but it has the effect of incorporating the new population of Latinos into the business life of Seaside in a way that encourages them to participate and contribute. They are not treated as outsiders or interlopers; instead, Seaside has found that treating all residents with respect, efficiency, and fairness works.

The city policy requiring all developers to hire Seaside residents first in any project accepted by the city has given residents a stake in the outcome and added to the perception by residents that the city is truly work-

ing for them. Sixty percent of residents recently showed that support by passing a sales tax referendum. A crucial part of the response to the new challenges presented by the loss of revenue from Fort Ord and the surge of immigrants has been to ensure that work on all development projects is on a competitive basis, that no special interest is allowed to dominate the process.

“It has been extremely successful. Look at the entities we are dealing with now. We have interest from different parts of the state and the nation, and we have contracts with entities not based on Monterey County or even the central coast. You have to expand your scope in order to attract investment,” Corpuz argues. He believes this can be accomplished only with a sense of the community as special, unique, and able to work together.

“The enormity of what we are trying to accomplish—not forgetting our past and building on our strengths—that’s the challenge,” Corpuz says. He emphasizes that the concept of an urban village is based on a focus on city neighborhoods, past and present: “Neighborhoods are [the] heart and soul of the city. It’s not just about the buildings; it’s about what people believe what their city is about [and] what they want it to be about.” So, rather than denying the past and

tearing down old structures, the city created numerous forums and focus groups directed to specific ethnic and racial communities that allow community involvement, input, and a real impact on development:

“We are starting our third of a series of focus groups. . . . The first ones were overwhelmingly positive about an urban village and having a new downtown core. Seaside is hungry for improvement. Making them a part of it, that’s the key. The best changes that are made in the community must come from the community itself. The city can provide the resources. Ultimately, it’s up to the community to decide.”

SEASIDE'S GOALS

Seaside is a model city in a state defined by diversity. Under the management of the city manager and his staff, Seaside has chosen a path that is already accomplishing these goals:

1. Seaside is Identifying and acknowledging the multiple communities, especially the communities of color, that make up its dominant population.
2. Seaside is taking affirmative action to include all ethnic and racial communities and organizations at all levels of city government, and it invites participation in commissions and boards.
3. As development projects move forward, the city is making a concerted effort to reach out to all of its communities to become active participants in everything from the planning process to the actual implementation and building of a newly revitalized city.
4. Seaside has found creative ways to become integrated into the regional concept of the Monterey Peninsula as a tourist destination by adding developments that complement rather than compete with its neighbors Carmel, Monterey, and Pebble Beach. **PM**

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