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The Cost of Segregation || Part III: Where We're Headed

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Photos courtesy of the Alberta Street Fair

An orchestra plays at the Alberta Street Fair in the Albina section of Portland, Ore. Albina is at the center of the city's African-American community but an influx of whites has made it one of Portland's most diverse neighborhoods.

Portland: Neighborhood boundaries fall

Influx of whites into previously black enclaves fuels sharp decrease in segregation

By Gordon Trowbridge / The Detroit News

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Bohemian art galleries and co-op organic groceries are neighbors to African-American beauty salons and Malcolm X murals on Alberta Street. They testify to what has occurred in the last decade in this trendy Northwest city, and what has not happened in Metro Detroit: the breakdown of



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neighborhood boundaries between black and white.

Unlike Detroit and other highly segregated metro regions, the Portland area saw a sharp decrease in residential segregation in the 1990s. Black-white segregation fell by 23 percent, according to a Detroit News analysis. The primary cause: an influx of whites, mostly young singles and couples, into neighborhoods once dominated by the area's small African-American minority.

"If not for Portland and Seattle, I'd be pretty depressed," said John Logan, one of the nation's leading researchers on segregation.

The Portland area, a region of 1.9 million people along the Columbia and Willamette rivers, between the Pacific Ocean and towering Cascade Mountains, does not have a large African-American population. It had fewer than 60,000 blacks in 2000, or about 3 percent of the population. Ten years earlier, however, Portland was the second most-segregated region west of the Rockies.

The dramatic improvement may give hope for those who seek to defeat segregation, but it also offers cautions.

New demand has rapidly increased the home values for many longtime residents, but it also has priced many low-income residents out of the market. And while some see white willingness to live in African-American neighborhoods as a sign of progress, concerns seep to the surface.

"Hopefully these newcomers come with the spirit of being neighborly," said Bishop A.A. Wells, founder and pastor of Emmanuel Temple Full Gospel Pentecostal Church, one of the city's leading black churches. "Whatever grows out of that kind of relationship will be positive and lasting.

"If not, that creates the possibility to heighten tensions."

Mellow city

Miriam Sieger grew up in Sterling Heights and Romeo. She had no doubt where she wanted to raise her young son, and it wasn't Macomb County.

"People here are so much more open and mellow," said Sieger, 20, outside her new home. She and husband-to-be Quinton Gardner, 22, rented the small house in Northwest Portland in July, selecting the Albina neighborhood, one of the city's most diverse, to raise 3-month-old Jubal.

Miriam says there are many reasons she has chosen Portland. The surroundings -- mountains, two mighty rivers and the ocean -- contribute to the fact that it's just a mellow place, less hung up on appearances or divisions.



Photos courtesy of the Alberta Street Fair

Street vendor Judee Moonbeam, left, gives Dolores Taylor a hug at the Alberta Street Fair in Portland, which saw a sharp decrease in segregation in the 1990s.

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"There's so much more diversity in Portland, it's hard to think about somebody differently just because of how they look. Here, everyone hangs out everywhere. In Detroit there's no real chance to meet people who aren't like you."

That attitude attracted another Easterner, Louisa Heamish, owner of the Star E. Rose coffee shop on Alberta Street, a mile or so from Sieger's home. Heamish grew up in Buffalo, N.Y.; thirty years ago, it was Portland's embrace of diversity that attracted her to settle here.

"I have children who are biracial," said Heamish, whose four children have a white mother and an African-American father. "When I got off the bus in Portland, I saw kids who looked like my kids."

Heamish's shop, with its artsy posters and alterna-teen employees, sits on a stretch of Alberta once considered Portland's heroin strip. Now, it's a few blocks down from an arts center and surrounded by gentrified buildings with storefronts and trendy loft apartments.

The real estate market has boomed in Albina. The assessed value of the area's property rose from \$1.2 billion to \$2.6 billion in the first half of the 1990s, according to The Oregonian newspaper. Home renovations are common, as are new housing developments, from condos and apartments to in-fill projects building a single house or a dozen.

It's a big turnaround for a neighborhood that has seen many setbacks.

The Albina neighborhood -- an area roughly centered on Alberta Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard -- is the unquestioned center of Portland's African-American community. Blacks began moving into Albina in the 1950s, pushed there by a series of urban-renewal projects to the south that expanded hospitals and built sports arenas at the cost of knocking down black-owned homes.

Later, the construction of Interstate 5 cut the neighborhood in two. By the late 1970s, Albina -- though not as blighted as Detroit's most troubled neighborhoods -- faced gang problems, a thriving street drug market and a sharp decline in business activity. All in all, a far cry from what it has become: One of the hottest real-estate markets in one of the nation's most trendy cities.

Portland: Hip neighborhoods dent segregation

The mostly black Albina neighborhood of Portland, Ore., in the 1990s, attracted thousands of new white residents, along with trendy shops and hip condo developments helping decrease segregation in the metro area by more than 20 percent.

CHANGE IN WHITE POPULATION, 1990-2000, BY CENSUS TRACT

-685 - 0 1 - 100 101 - 250 251 - 400 More than 400





Limiting growth

The region's anti-sprawl initiatives may be a big factor. Nature already had put a premium on land here: Large rivers and surrounding hills leave a fairly narrow valley for development, and rugged Mount Hood is as close to downtown Portland as Pontiac is to downtown Detroit.

Government has put even more of a premium on land. Portland's three-county metropolitan government has set a strict development boundary surrounding the city, making it more difficult for development to spill far beyond the urban core.

So, instead of moving to far-flung suburbs, as many whites in Metro Detroit have done, suburbanites have started to look inward.

Mike Burton, the metro government's chief executive, called integration an unintended effect of the growth boundary.

"If the strategies we've put in place have enabled people to have more options, and they choose in the process to move next door to someone of a different race, I think that's great," Burton said.

But Burton and other leaders, white and black, almost universally voice the concern that increased integration has done harm as well as good.

"For those who own those homes and can now sell them for a couple hundred thousand dollars, it's great," said Rex Burkholder, who represents the area on the metro government council. "For others, especially renters, they're being displaced, which hurts them and the black churches and organizations that are pretty concentrated in that area."

Wells, Emmanuel Temple's leader, said this is his great worry.

Since he founded it 36 years ago, Wells' church has tried everything from low-cost housing initiatives to a start-up electronics business to buying a neighborhood grocery, in an effort to address the drugs, crime and poverty that afflicted the neighborhood. Careful with his words, he nonetheless makes clear his belief that the new white residents sometimes lack appreciation for longtime residents -- such as a few whites who objected to part of the church expansion now under way.

More pressing, he said, is the problem of displaced low-income residents, priced out of the neighborhood by rising rents. The combination of economic hardship and new residents who are sometimes unaware or unconcerned about that hardship, he said, is doubly troubling.

"In the mix are people who bring a neighborly spirit and look at the stability and viability of the neighborhood," he said. "It would not be false to say Portland has a great deal of good will. But even today, there are ways racism and greed need to be reckoned with."

While many blacks and whites have benefited, Wells said, from Albina's real estate boom, he said the disparity in home ownership between blacks and whites means blacks have missed out on much of the bounty.

Living together

Such concerns are not universal, even among prominent African Americans.

"When the houses were under \$10,000, why weren't they (Albina's blacks) buying them then?" said Robert Boyer, manager of Albina's King Neighborhood Facility.

Boyer has been a fixture in Portland black politics almost since he settled here after leaving the Air Force in 1961. He's managed Jesse Jackson's presidential campaigns here, been a leader in the local longshoreman's union, even served briefly in the state Senate.

Now, he's part historian, part political activist, part mentor to the latest generation of kids who wander into his center.

"Caucasian, African American, Caucasian, African American," he ticks off the houses as he drives up the cul-de-sac to his home of more than three decades. A driving tour of Albina with Boyer is a trip through the history of Portland's black community.

A native of Philadelphia, he still wears a hat bearing the name of the Catholic high school that is his alma mater. The diversity of that school, he said, taught him the importance of knowing other cultures.

"We had Italian families, Irish families, Jewish families," he said. "I knew when I was there those kids supported me, protected me -- that's why I still wear this hat. ... You want to tell me people who've fought together, worked together, can't live together?"

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