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Opinion

Latinos see themselves as slow-growth's target

By Lawrence A. Herzog

A new voice is emerging in the debate about growth in California, and it may be the most powerful of all. It is the voice of California's growing Latino population.

Latinos will soon be the nation's largest minority. By the year 2,000, they will make up nearly one-third of California's population. Already 4 million Latinos — the largest portion in the state — live in California's southern half, where some 16 million people are expected to reside by the end of the century.

It is in this increasingly congested megalopolis that the cry for "growth control" — what to do about the region's skyrocketing population — has become a catch phrase. It has ignited a grass-roots political movement that is spreading across Southern California's suburban communities, from the Mojave Desert and the San Gabriel Mountains to the Mexican border.

Because of their growing numbers, Hispanics are now taking a harder look at where they stand in the growth debate. Until recently, many Latinos remained quiet on the matter. "The Hispanic community has not been a player," says John Gamboa of the San Francisco-based Latino Issues Forum.

But this may be changing. According to Leo Estrada, professor of urban planning at the University of California-Los Angeles, some Latinos view slow growth as white, middle-class homeowners' reaction to the inevitable ethnic and demographic changes that are sweeping the state. In the face of a seemingly endless stream of Third World immigrants, many of them Hispanic, suburban homeowners want to restrict growth.

"They are trying to hold back time," says Estrada. "Anything that threatens home values, threatens their future."

The question is whether slow growth will exclude Latinos from suburban neighborhoods or deny them access to housing. Some Latinos already view the slow-growth movement as a subtle form of racism. "This process is testing our sense of tolerance," says Estrada.

Although Southern California finds itself in the midst of one of the great land booms of the century, new housing construction in the suburbs has not improved the quality of life for the majority of Latinos. Suburban growth may generate prosperity for one part of the metropolis, but Hispanics are usually living elsewhere. Many are renters and, as such, constrained in their economic and living choices.

The lines dividing ethnic communities in Southern California are becoming more sharply drawn. "It's starting to look like a homeland, apartheid situation. It's a little scary," says Estrada.

In San Diego County, where Southern California meets Mexico, a housing boom in the northern part of the metropolis has hardly affected the region's quarter-million Latinos, most of whom live in the South Bay, the cluster of communities lying between

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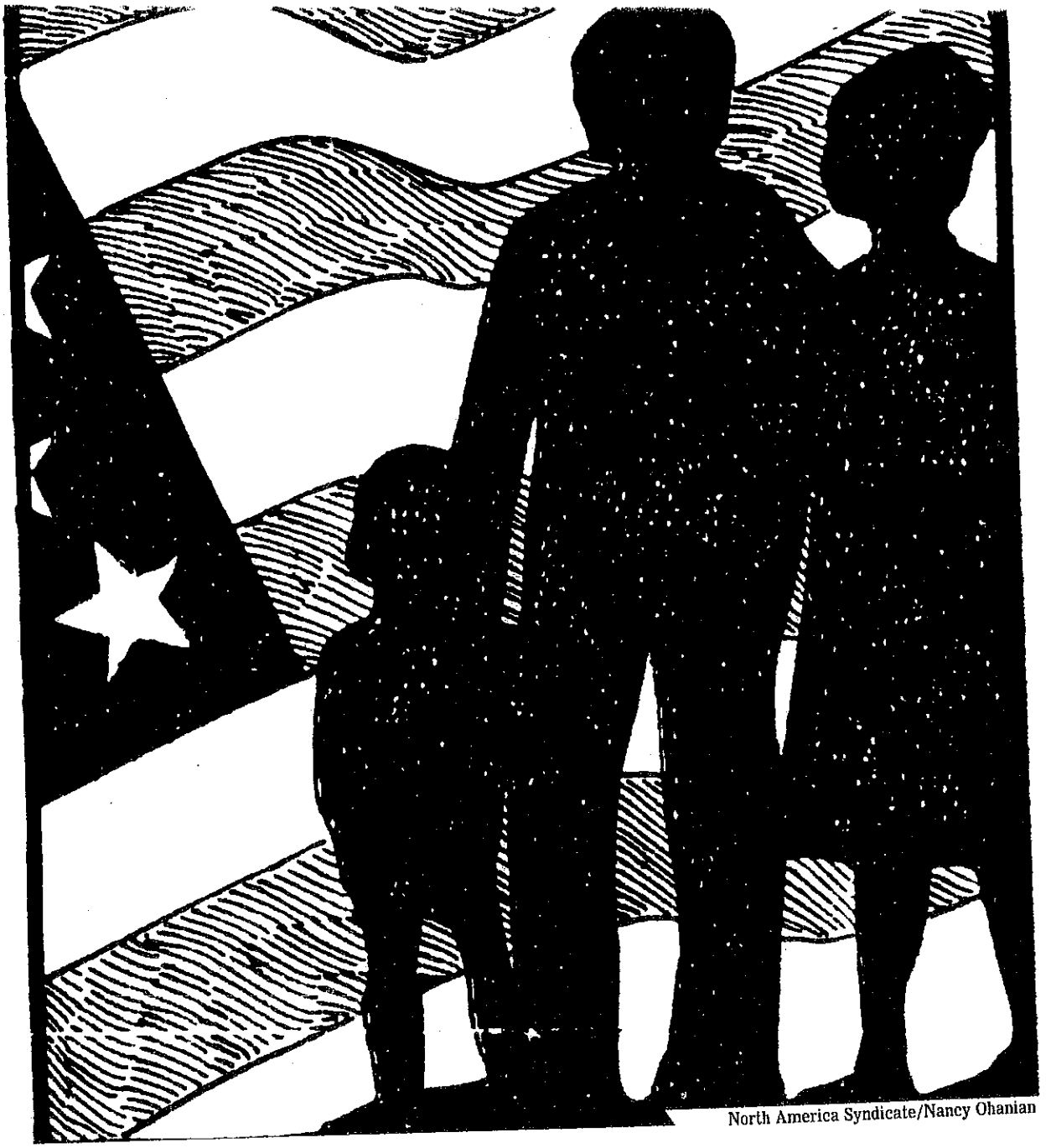
Herzog is coordinator of urban studies and planning at the University of California, San Diego. A contributing editor for Pacific News Services, he is author of Where North Meets South *(University of Texas Press, 1989).*



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the Mexican border and downtown.

"The social gradient is clearly north to south ... ," wrote urban design scholars Kevin Lynch and Donald Appleyard of San Diego as early as 1974. "South of the border are the extensive slums, and the pattern runs right up to North County. For prestige, a home buyer will locate as far 'upstream' as he can afford."

By the year 2,000, more than a million people will live in San Diego's North County, in towns called Vista, Escondido, San Marcos, Del Mar, Encinitas. The towns may have Spanish sounding names, but they will be inhabited by non-Hispanics.

Today the Latino presence in North County comes mainly from the temporary, undocumented Mexican agricultural workers who stand in groups each morning along the roads and in public places, waiting for temporary work. Resentment toward these Mexican migrants has surfaced within the permanent Anglo community, and it occasionally has gotten nasty.

"The attitude of Anglos is 'this is our country.' Hispanics are invaders," says Ozzie Venzor, one Latino leader from the area. While most of the hostility is directed against immigrant workers, it can spill over to others. "There's an undercurrent of racism," he notes. "If you defend undocumented workers, Anglos lash out at you."

It should come as no great surprise, then, that some of San Diego's Chicano leaders see growth control as yet another barrier created by the white population to keep Latinos across town. During the height of the campaign for four city and county growth control measures on the November ballot, Mexican-American leaders almost unanimously opposed slow growth.

Pro-growth Latino leaders, however, seem to be under the impression that Latinos are actually employed in the sectors most affected by growth — construction and real estate. In fact, construction and real estate are largely Anglo-controlled businesses in San Diego. And, while some Latinos do work as building sub-contractors, skilled jobs are still in the hands of non-Latinos.

In real estate and land development there are also

few key Latinos.

Some Latino leaders have argued, too, that slow growth will diminish the chances for many Latinos to live in suburban neighborhoods. "Slow growth is an astute way to exclude us," says Tony Valencia, director of the Mexican and American Foundation.

But such assumptions noticeably are being challenged.

"Growth is not necessarily a way out of poverty for minority populations," says Nico Calavita, professor of urban planning at San Diego State University. In fact, Calavita argues, "growth offers false hope to minorities; it will not solve their housing problems."

"No one is going to build in minority neighborhoods because they can't get a return on their investment," notes Joseph Martinez, a San Diego architect and leader in the Latino community.

But there is an easier way to open neighborhoods to minorities, according to Oscar Newman, one of the nation's leading experts on minority and low income housing: establish what are called inclusionary zoning policies, which guarantee that for every 100 units of new housing built, 20 or 25 will be of the moderate-income variety. Newman points out that this approach has been employed successfully in a number of East Coast cities.

"It is not simply a question of building minority housing, but how you distribute that housing," says Calavita. "In San Diego, for example, the city has dumped most of the public housing in San Ysidro. That simply reinforces an existing segregation pattern."

Have San Diego's Hispanics adequately studied the effects of slow growth? This question is now being debated in some circles here. "Some of the arguments against slow growth were strictly emotional. They were not backed up by research," commented Alfredo Velasco, director of the Sherman Heights Community Center.

"We're not always organized enough to deal with all of the issues," says David Valladolid, a board member of the Chicano Federation. Chicanos traditionally have not paid much attention to the growth debate, according to Valladolid. "We've tended to burn ourselves out in other areas."

Meanwhile, some Latinos charge that their colleagues have sold out to downtown developers, or are themselves engaged in the development business.

The development industry itself has made a noticeable effort to court minorities, particularly in San Diego, as part of highly sophisticated, multi-million-dollar campaigns aimed at defeating slow-growth propositions throughout Southern California. Last fall, they raised an estimated $ 4 million in Orange County and $ 2.4 million in San Diego County to defeat slow-growth measures.

The "growth machine" — University of California, Santa Barbara, sociologist Harvey Molotch's label for the coalition of developers, politicans, retail businesses, labor unions, and chambers of commerce — is decidedly Anglo-based. Its main goal often has little to do with the improvement of the lives of minorities. Typically, as Molotch has written, the growth industry advocates an intensification of the use of urban land, regardless of its consequences.

But the consequences for California — as a growing number of Latinos now realize — are too severe to be ignored. To debate growth in California without the full involvement of Latinos, in fact, is to miss the point. If Latinos are reappraising their positions, they have chosen the right moment to do so.