

Town's metamorphosis

Boulder Creek goes from hippies to 'chippies'

By MARIA GAURA
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BENEATH THE redwoods and behind the folksy wooden facades of downtown Boulder Creek a quiet revolution is taking place.

What was once a remote vacation and retirement community has rapidly become a neighborhood of choice for Silicon Valley "computer commuters," and the shift in population is having profound effects on traffic, housing, schools and businesses in the Boulder Creek area.

"The county has always looked at Boulder Creek as the back porch of Santa Cruz," said businessman Terry Vierra. "But we're really the county's front door, we're the closest link to

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— John Preiskorn, school superintendent

the Santa Clara Valley."

Though relatively few new homes have been built in the Boulder Creek area in the past decade, the area's population has swelled as numerous vacation homes have been snapped up by families fleeing the congestion and high prices in Silicon Valley. Because of its proximity to the county line, Boulder Creek is feeling the brunt of the suburbanization of Santa Cruz County.

Once a quiet rural artery, Highway 9 is now a busy, dangerous road. During commute hours, the backups can stretch for two miles. Residents and real estate salespeople alike have

watched in awe as housing prices have soared in the past couple of years. The town's elementary school, designed to hold 450 students, now houses 1,000 children — and will be bursting at the seams with 1,200 students by the time the new Redwood Elementary school opens in 1990.

But despite the problems, Boulder Creek residents see their town as a refuge from the stress and fast-paced living in Silicon Valley. The homes are still a good deal when compared to housing in Santa Clara County, and families see the intimate, small-town atmosphere as ideal for raising their children.

Bill Gutzwiller and his wife Kathy Phillips moved to Boulder Creek from Venice, Calif., 10 years ago when they decided to start a family. Gutzwiller owns the Pinnacle Grouse jewelry store and is active in the Boulder Creek Business Association.

"We determined we wanted to have children, and we moved here with that clear intention in mind," Gutzwiller said. "There's something about these piney woods, the fertile rain forest that has that effect on people."

It seems that a lot of other couples had the same idea at the same time. Today, Gutzwiller's daughter Tracy attends Boulder Creek Elementary School, which is crowded with more than twice as many students as it was designed to hold. Because extra classrooms have had to be installed on the school's play areas, the children must now take recess and lunchtime in shifts.

Plans for a new elementary school are now under way, and it should be open for use in another 18 months.

according to School District Superintendent John Preiskorn. The recent "baby boomlet" has hit the San Lorenzo Valley particularly hard because new families flooding into the area have supplemented the high birthrate of people already living here, he said.

"People from the computer industry are moving here because it's a nice place and because of the good school system," Preiskorn said. "Lots of retired people have been selling their summer houses, and the people who buy them have two or three kids."

But while the streets, schools and houses have been feeling kind of crowded lately, downtown businesses have been feeling a different sort of pinch. In 1985-86 the downtown experienced a serious downturn — a dozen storefronts stood empty and local newspapers announced the demise of Boulder Creek.

Those reports made Gutzwiller see red.

"Everybody literally wrote us off as dead," he said. "And they completely missed the real story. Boulder Creek wasn't dying, it was a community in transition ... and nobody knew what was happening."

Part of the problem was an information lag — merchants were setting up their business and merchandising strategies using demographic information from the 1980 census, the most recent information available. But between 1980 and 1985 the demographics of Boulder Creek had

changed radically — and merchants were at a loss to find out where their planning had fallen short.

According to the 1980 census, "There were a lot of welfare recipients (living in the area), retired people and college kids," said Gutzwiller. "It was a transient population ... and a Mecca for artists and craftspeople, who are not necessarily high wage earners.

"One of our problems today is that people have an image of Boulder Creek that quite frankly isn't so," he said.

Tired of hearing people "kick Boulder Creek in the can," Gutzwiller picked up the phone and started calling around, looking for grants to study the town's economic problems. What he found was the Rural Renaissance grant program, a state program intended to help create jobs in rural communities. With the backing of the Boulder Creek Business Association a grant was obtained and an economic study of the community begun.

The results of that study startled even people who've lived in Boulder Creek for decades. The study found that the average household income in Boulder Creek was \$34,733 in 1988, the second highest in the county after Aptos. Over 60 percent of the area's workforce is employed in professional, administrative and high-tech jobs, and most of them commute to work outside of Santa Cruz County.

Most significant for the troubled business community, the study found that while Boulder Creek's retail

sales totaled \$13.8 million, another \$55 million in sales are "leaking" out to other communities.

"The new influx of people who've moved to the Valley in the past three years haven't broken their old shopping habits," said Terry Vierra, owner of Boulder Creek Liquors and member of the BCBA. "They're going to the malls over the hill."

But the study has also given merchants some strong hints as to where local business should be putting its efforts. Residents responding to a mailed questionnaire said they would like to see a small movie theater in Boulder Creek, as well as more recreation options, more restaurants and a better selection of clothing and gift shops.

The influx of families with children could also be a boost to new businesses. Asked what new business might succeed in Boulder Creek, Vierra suggested a shoe store. Gutzwiller suggested a diaper service, a small-appliance store ("with blenders and such") or a bed-and-breakfast inn.

Now that they have a clearer picture of what the town's needs are, Boulder Creek merchants and residents are hoping to get county funding for the creation of a town plan similar to the one drawn up for nearby Felton, and another that is under way in Ben Lomond.

Some merchants are also considering assessing themselves to pay for

more parking spaces and other amenities in the downtown area.

But the one thing nobody wants to change is Boulder Creek's rural, homey image.

"People are sometimes afraid that the businesses want to turn this place into another Scotts Valley," Gutzwiller said. "But we want to preserve the town as much or more than anyone else. The fundamental issue here is the quality of life."