

Felton: farewell, fast lane

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FELTON — The construction business has not boomed in Felton in the past decade.

There aren't any high-density housing complexes, huge mansions perched on hillsides, vast parking lots or the ring of hammers echoing through the woods. Felton has avoided the sprawl many communities experienced in the '80s.

Good luck finding someone complaining.

Slow growth has kept alive the small-town image embraced by this close-knit community of 5,350.

From 1980 to 1990, there was an 8 percent increase in the number of homes built in the region, the slowest rate of growth in the county and far less than the county average of 18 percent, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

"Felton is a real middle-class town," said Gordon Rudy, who has run a gas station and now a U-Haul shop in Felton since the mid-'70s. "It's a family town ... it's a lot like your small towns that you'd find in the gold country."

The old-fashioned atmosphere is obvious in the 100-year-old covered bridge, steam-locomotive railroad and pancake breakfasts at the volunteer fire department.

Life is slow in Felton.

"You can always tell who the out-of-towners are," said Glenn Crow, a 12-year resident. "They're always in a hurry."

Rudy said one aspect of Felton that keeps it in touch with the burgeoning populations of nearby communities, like Santa Cruz and Scotts Valley, is the intersection of Graham Hill Road and Highway 9, where his shop sits.

"It tends to be a high-speed turnstile," Rudy said of the crossroads. "It spits cars toward Boulder Creek and Ben Lomond. People spin right through and don't slow down to take a look at what's here."

But urban sprawl hasn't caught up with Felton.

Over the ridge in Scotts Valley, growth was 32 percent, about four times as rapid as Felton's. The decade before, Felton had more homes than Scotts Valley. As of 1990, Felton had 2,348 houses while its neighbor to the south has 3,556.

"I think people in the San Lorenzo Valley in general pride themselves on the oldness, uniqueness and the pioneer attitude," said John Masterman, a resident. "You're not likely going to see a Kmart or a McDonald's here."

That's what separates Felton from Scotts Valley, Rudy said.

"If you're a repeat customer here, they know who you are. If you're a repeat customer in Kmart, they're never going to know who you are," he said.

Felton was once a vacationers' stronghold, but now seasonal homes account for only about 12 percent of the houses here.

The importance of recreation and open space to residents is clear in the acreage set aside for parkland. Felton sits in the middle of Henry Cowell State Park, which totals 4,282 acres.

"If you live here, you like the outdoors and you're generally going to be a little bit more inclined to be into recreation," said Masterman, who with Jim Bricken organized neighbors to build Felton Commons county park.