

AN ISLAND *of* DIVERSITY

Race and ethnicity still divide much of Santa Cruz County, but an Amesti Road neighborhood is the area's melting pot

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Census 2000

WATSONVILLE

In a county of racial extremes, Watsonville's Amesti Road neighborhood is unique.

Most of Santa Cruz County is either heavily white or heavily Latino. Census data released last month shows most of the North and Mid-County is 80 to 90 percent white while Watsonville neighborhoods are 60 to 88 percent Latino.

But the Amesti Road area, a triangle-shaped census tract bound by Green Valley Road, Pioneer Road and Corralitos Creek, strikes a balance. According to the Census Bureau, the neighborhood, which is cut in two by Amesti Road, has a population of 2,450, 52 percent white and 42 percent Latino, making it the most racially balanced neighborhood in the county.

The county is divided into 52 census tracts, statistical areas ranging from 2,000 to 7,800 people. Whites and Latinos are the county's largest groups. Census data shows Asian, black, American Indian and mixed-race residents make up a tiny portion of the county's racial mix.

Thirty-year Amesti Road resident Barry George said the census data on race is well reflected among his middle-class neighbors.

"That's pretty much exactly what it's like," he said. "Everybody seems to get along fine."

Jose Guadalupe, who lived in the area but moved to Watsonville a few years ago, said his neighborhood had an almost even blend of whites and Latinos.

"There was a good mix," he said. "It worked great."

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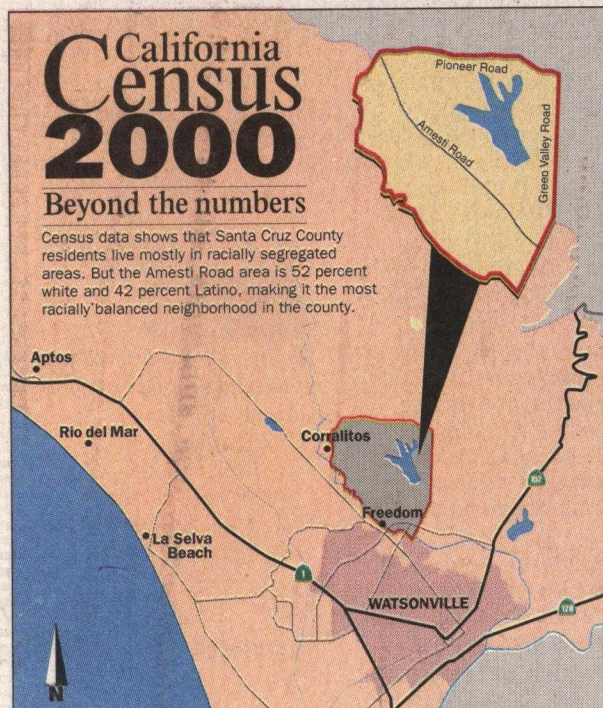


Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Former county supervisor Ray Belgard has lived in the Amesti Road neighborhood for 30 years.

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RAY BELGARD



Anthony L. Solis/Sentinel



Bart Valenzuela just moved into a home in the neighborhood he inherited from his grandfather.

'It's a great neighborhood.'

BART VALENZUELA

Census: Neighborhood an island of diversity

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Just a short drive from the fast-food restaurants and auto repair shops on busy Freedom Boulevard, Amesti Road has a country flavor. Residents live near apple orchards and raspberry fields and enjoy sweeping views of the nearby Santa Cruz Mountains foothills.

The neighborhood's nearest grocery store is the spiffy Four Corners Market. Owner Debbie Chin, who lives just outside the neighborhood in Corralitos, sees the neighborhood's diversity on a daily basis as residents come in to shop.

"We've got a few people using food stamps as well as the soccer moms driving Mercedes," she said.

Chin stocks a variety of items to satisfy her clientele. Tidy rows of canned menudo and red enchilada sauce stand next to shelves of wine and pasta products on a black-and-white checkered floor.

The produce section includes a hulking glass jar of dill pickles, packages of tofu as well as jalapeños and locally made salsa.

As tribute to the area's farming roots and a way to ward off graffiti artists, she hired a muralist to paint an agricultural scene on an exterior wall.

She hopes rising property values won't change the country character of the area.

"I'm afraid it's becoming gentrified," she said.

Although census figures show an even blend of whites and Latinos, the two groups don't necessarily live side-by-side. The neighborhood includes \$500,000 ranch-style homes as well as a colony of ramshackle mobile homes at Marmo's Pinto Lake.

The mobile home park, which has been cited by the county for a number of health and safety violations, is home to about 40 mostly Latino families.

The neighborhood is not an affordable one. Linda Haines, associate real estate broker for Oliver Realty, said the median home value in the area is about \$400,000.

Adam Antuna has lived on Amesti Road for seven years and grew up nearby. He said the area is about a "50-50" mix of whites and Latinos but most new residents are white and affluent.

"A lot of the Latinos moved here a long time ago before it got so expensive," he said.

Bart Valenzuela just moved into a home he inherited from his grandfather, a house that was the site of farm labor housing for lettuce workers.

"I've been coming here since I was a kid," he said, as he pushed an out-of-gas lawnmower down the street. "It's a great neighborhood."

Mary Gates, who has lived in the Amesti Road area for 21 years, was surprised to know she lives in such a racially blended area.

"I don't notice it," she said. "There're (no Latinos) in my neighborhood. I know that."

The neighborhood mix appears to be changing. It's not possible to compare 1990 and 2000 census data because census tract boundaries changed, but some residents say change is afoot.

When George moved to the area 30 years ago, he said it was mainly white. Over the years more Latinos have moved in and many older and white residents have moved out, cashing in high property values, he said.

Conrado Irao, a U.S. Postal Service carrier whose route includes the Amesti Road area, said the opposite is true.

"I've noticed a lot of white people moving out," he said. "I think the Hispanics are taking over."

Ray Belgard, former county supervisor and 30-year Amesti Road resident, said the influx of white and Latinos has been about equal. When he walked his neighborhood during campaigns, he was pleased to see the area's white and Latino mix.

"It's good to know we're still pretty balanced," he said.

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