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MARK SIMON

E. Palo Alto — a model for Oakland

Ex-‘murder capital’
found some answers

Ten years ago, East Palo Alto was as awash in violence as Oakland is right now.

It was the nation’s “murder capital,” with more slayings per capita than any other city in America.

Today, in East Palo Alto, instead of deadly drug dealers perched on a street corner, a crane is perched alongside Highway 101. It is preparing for the construction of an Ikea store, part of the Ravenswood 101 regional shopping center.

The U.S. census shows that the number of East Palo Alto residents with jobs rose by 1,000 from 1990 to 2000.

The 2000 census reported the per capita income in East Palo Alto was nearly \$4,000 higher than in 1990.

Crime is down, jobs are up. It’s no coincidence.

And in East Palo Alto’s success there may be a blueprint for Oakland.

No one’s rushing to tell Oakland what to do. No one is asserting that East Palo Alto, with a population one-tenth the size of Oakland’s, has all the answers. It’s just that East Palo Alto had the same problems, and what it did to solve them has worked.

It’s a myth that the suburbs don’t have urban problems. They have the same problems, just not in an urban setting.

What worked in East Palo Alto was a confluence of determined interests — residents united in their anger over crime, a substantial infusion of police, cooperation from neighboring cities, help from state and federal officials and a city leadership determined to end the violence and eliminate the causes of violence.

Although crime was nothing new in East Palo Alto, it had reached staggering proportions by 1992. The city, perched at the western end of the Dumbarton

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Bridge, had become a drugstore for the Bay Area. Drugs were sold openly on the street, and gunfire was frequent as dealers and gangs fought over turf. Felons freely roamed the streets.

“We had a crisis that was out of hand because of the socioeconomic problems, which were exacerbated by an overmatched Police Department,” said Alameda Police Chief Burnham Matthews, who headed the East Palo Alto department in 1992.

Everyone contributed.

East Palo Alto Mayor Sharifa Wilson and Councilwoman Rose Jacobs Gibson met with the mayors of Palo Alto and Menlo Park and asked for their help, reasoning that a considerable portion of the drug buyers were coming from their side of the freeway.

Newly elected San Mateo County Sheriff Don Horsley and two new county supervisors, Mike Nevin and Ruben Barrales, began pressing for immediate aid.

Menlo Park and Palo Alto loaned police officers to East Palo Alto. Horsley sent deputies. The California Highway Patrol sent in

officers.

Virtually overnight, the size of the East Palo Alto police force doubled. Drug dealers were chased off their corners, would-be buyers were stopped by the CHP, parole violators were picked up.

Residents shined spotlights on drug deals and recorded the license plates of cars whose drivers were cruising for drugs, passing the information on to police.

“We had to say the drugstore was closed,” said Nevin.

The murder rate decreased by 86 percent the next year.

“No one wants to feel like you’re living in a police state,” said Jacobs Gibson, now a county supervisor. “But you have to take the responsibility to do what needs to be done.”

When the crime rate dropped, the coalition of public officials and residents went to work on the social and economic conditions that led to the crime.

“No one wants to feel like you’re living in a police state. But you have to take the responsibility to do what needs to be done.”

JACOBS GIBSON, San Mateo County supervisor

“Job training, education, recreation — we were lacking all of that,” said Jacobs Gibson.

The city and its residents began an aggressive program of economic development that led to the Ravenswood 101 center, anchored by Home Depot.

“We don’t raise our kids to go out on the corner and sell drugs. Out of desperation they move into illegal activities. If we give them a choice of standing on a street corner hustling drugs or working at Home Depot, they’ll opt for Home Depot,” Wilson said.

“Economics does impact drug traffic,” Wilson said.

At the same time, public, private and nonprofit entities started after-school programs, youth sports programs and anti-drug programs and efforts were begun to improve or build parks and recreational facilities.

Everyone may have been mak-

ing it up as they went along, but in the end it was a formula that could be easily applied to Oakland — get help, cooperate across jurisdictions, flood the high-crime area with law enforcement, tamp down on crime and then seize the moment to work on the underlying issues.

Oakland may have 10 times the population, “but they don’t have 10 times the problem,” said Nevin.

Wilson was pained to see a news report the other day in which Oaklanders were casting blame for the city’s violence.

“This is not a time for them to point fingers at each other. This is a time to create partnerships,” she said.

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