

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

## Redevelopment credited for Pittsburg's push against crime

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While politicians and judges in the state capital decide the fate of redevelopment agencies, they only need look about 50 miles down the Sacramento River to see the massive changes redevelopment has brought to a blue-collar city that was once an East Bay crime hotbed.

A couple decades ago, the landscape of downtown Pittsburg was dotted with dilapidated buildings, parks filled with drug addicts and a pervasive fear among residents for their safety.

Today, after seven years of one of the most ambitious redevelopment efforts in the state, the blight and crime have largely disappeared from downtown, replaced with a new elementary school, several restaurants and specialty stores, townhouses -- and even a caviar shop.

"When I moved my business down here (in 2004), everyone thought I was nuts," said lifelong resident Marisa Belleci, who runs a multimedia marketing business in the same building her father owned when she was a child.

"Now, those same people say I was smart and made a good decision."

Pittsburg reported last year that its crime rate had fallen to a 50-year low. The per-capita crime rate, adjusted for a population of 100,000, fell nearly 47 percent from 1990 to 2010.

Pittsburg has not recorded a homicide this year, an astonishing accomplishment for a city in which they were once typical, according to Detective Chuck Blazer, a 17-year veteran of the force. Pittsburg has had at least two homicides each year since 1985, with a high of 10 in 1992.

Blazer patrols the city as part of the Neighborhood Improvement Team, a community policing unit that works with residents to oust criminals before they get a foothold.

"This old, rundown neighborhood has a new face," Blazer said. "Where before we might make several arrests in a day, now we often don't make any."

The extent to which the city's redevelopment efforts deserve most of the credit for the steady decline in crime is open to debate. However, many residents and city leaders say it has played a huge role.

"I remember hearing, 'My husband won't let me come down here.' Now, you look out and you see people coming here to the farmers market on Saturday, walking on the street with their dogs and strollers. It's just delightful," said Chris Lanzafame, owner of a 96-year-old family-run furniture business downtown.

Like many longtime residents, Lanzafame credits redevelopment for bringing new investors into the community and assisting the city's aggressive effort to uproot crime.

Redevelopment funds, which come from city-issued bonds and increases in area property tax, were used to purchase and rehabilitate troubled properties. Pittsburg, which has the fourth-largest redevelopment area in the Bay Area behind San Jose, Oakland and San Francisco, has put more than \$100 million of redevelopment funds into the downtown; the money has gone toward new or remodeled buildings, adding sidewalks and streets, and removing troubled properties that police say are the root cause of many crime problems.

"Redevelopment has been a crucial piece. It's helped provide the money to allow us to take away those buildings and areas that attracted vandalism and theft," police Capt. Brian Addington said.

In 2007, Pittsburg worked with a local developer on a \$3.25 million deal to purchase two motels on 10th Street with a troubled reputation, relocate the tenants and raze the structures.

The site of a card room where police regularly broke up fights has a new building that houses the offices of the Chamber of Commerce, Blazer said.

But with the future of redevelopment cloudy statewide, Pittsburg may be unable to do more.

Under a new policy introduced by Gov. Jerry Brown that is being challenged in the state Supreme Court, cities and counties can maintain their redevelopment agencies by paying a fee. Pittsburg's fee in the first year would be \$6.5 million, a lot of cash for a city with a \$30 million annual budget.

Redevelopment was not the only tool Pittsburg used to curb crime. It was complemented by a major emphasis on better police work, according to many residents.

"There's been a concentration of police presence downtown, where a lot of the redevelopment money has been spent," said Frank Gordon, a 31-year resident of the city and a former planning commissioner. "The downtown was pretty much the Wild, Wild West back in the '80s."

Before Will Casey, the city's current mayor, became police chief in 1993, officers were often slow to respond to calls, and criminals would be long gone before they arrived, Lanzafame said.

He remembers a time in the late '70s when his business was burglarized nine times in 15 days, usually after the suspects broke through his plate-glass windows.

"A lot of people thought we were crazy, having 11-foot-high windows," he said.

Casey, with the help of current police Chief Aaron Baker, beefed up patrols and focused on drug dealers.

"The downtown became unattractive to drug dealers because they got taken on by the police immediately," Casey said.

Redevelopment money funded some of the closed-circuit cameras that continuously monitor certain spots of downtown.

However, UC Berkeley law professor Frank Zimring cautioned against attributing all of Pittsburg's decline in crime to redevelopment and better policing.

Crime rates were at a high nationwide in the early '90s and fell dramatically in lock-step with Pittsburg's decline, said Zimring, author of "The Great American Crime Decline."

"I wouldn't want to jump to conclusions that the crime rate can be reliably contained by police," he said. "However, a careful and cautious accounting might well conclude that police-activated changes are responsible for part of the good news."

Pittsburg's use of redevelopment money to remove unkempt homes with absent landlords also helped disperse crime, according to police.

"I'm sure when Pittsburg redeveloped and got rid of some of their housing, those committing crimes were displaced all over the county," Antioch police Chief Allan Cantando said. "I'm sure we got some, but I'm sure Bay Point did, I'm sure Oakley did, I'm sure even Brentwood did."

falling fast

Pittsburg's Part I crime -- which includes homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, vehicle theft, larceny and arson -- has declined steadily over the past 20 years. Here are the numbers, adjusted for a population of 100,000.

Year Crimes

1990 6,370

2000 4,022

2010 3,406

Source: Pittsburg Police Department