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Drummond: Deep East Oakland rising

By Tammerlin Drummond Oakland Tribune Columnist Posted: 01/25/2011 07:14:38 PMPST Updated: 01/25/2011 08:07:13 PM PST

You won't find many people venturing past 70th Avenue in Oakland toward San Leandro unless (1) they live there (2) they're looking for prostitutes and/or drugs, or (3) they're headed to the airport or an event at the Coliseum complex.

Online travel sites warn out-of-town visitors to "avoid the dangerous area between 70th and 100th Avenues."

As one might imagine, that doesn't do a lot for a community's self-esteem.

The fact is, the immature, unconscious young people with guns who commit most of the appalling crimes represent a very small minority of the residents who live in Deep East. Many more people are vested in the community despite its challenges.

As a result of their dogged -- often frustrating -- efforts over the years, Deep East is undergoing a slow but steady transformation. This despite a struggling economy.

New housing developments have sprouted like dandelions in weed-filled lots. A state-of-the-art public library will open Saturday. Meanwhile, an aquatics sports complex built to nationally recognized LEED green building performance standards will open in the spring.

Tassafaronga Village, a new affordable housing complex, has transformed a blighted area near 84th Avenue and San Leandro Street. There are 157 apartment and townhouse-style units that replaced rundown public housing.

Habitat for Humanity plans to build another 22 townhouses for residents who purchase the

homes through sweat equity. In the shadows of overhead BART tracks, flags advertise houses for sale at Arcadia Park, Pulte Homes' 163 single-family-home development. There is the 58-unit Brookfield Place affordable rental apartment complex down the street.

The new developments are bright spots of hope amid the gray desolation of rundown warehouses and train tracks.

On Saturday, the long-awaited East Oakland Community Library on 81st Avenue will open its doors to the public.

The \$14.8 million library is a good example of what committed, dedicated individuals can accomplish. It is a public-private partnership at its best.

The city's finances are in such bad shape that there is talk of closing libraries.

Yet Oakland library officials and Friends of the Oakland Public Library managed to raise \$3 million in donations for the East Oakland Community library. There were 300 donors in all. Individuals, foundations, local business people and other organizations.

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It will be the second largest library, after the main downtown branch. The collection houses 30,000 books, DVDs and CDs. Bays of computers.

The library probably wouldn't be as big a deal were it opening in, say, San Leandro. But in deep East Oakland, it is a powerful symbol of community pride.

The library is a beautiful, welcoming space.

The shades, decorated with murals, can be lowered to let in natural light. The stained glass was made in Germany. The light fixtures are custom-made, Italian.

Children helped design the space, which includes an area for poetry reading. Kids who go to Acorn Woodland Elementary and EnCompass Academy next door will have their own entrance. It is the first partnership between the Oakland library and Oakland Unified School District.

Meanwhile, the \$24 million East Oakland Sports Center will soon open on Edes Avenue across from FedEx.

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City Council President Larry Reid has spent some 15 years championing the aquatics and rec center that is in his district.

The project took a lot longer than Reid would have imagined. If it had been a child, it would be in high school by now.

Reid has reason to be proud of the gorgeous complex down the street from the new Pet Food Express plant that he helped lure from San Leandro.

The new library and the sports center give kids some place to go other than the streets.

It also sends a message that we care about what happens to them -- even if they happen to live in a part of town that some people think has no redeeming qualities.

Tammerlin Drummond is a columnist for Bay Area News Group. Contact her at tdrummond@bayareanewsgroup.com or follow her at Twitter.com/tammerlin.

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