

## Fairs help boost S.F. neighborhoods' profile

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Some of their residents call them forgotten neighborhoods - working-class enclaves in the southeast section of the city that get little attention from tourists and most San Franciscans, except when they are rocked by violence.

But a visit to these diverse neighborhoods - the Excelsior, Portola, Visitacion Valley and Oceanview-Merced Heights-Ingleside area, known as the OMI - reveals a remnant of a San Francisco that's nearly been lost, one filled with families who own homes and neighbors who know each other's names.

Groups in each neighborhood have been working hard in recent years to bring these areas back to life, starting with the commercial corridors. With help from nonprofits and the city, they've revitalized these main streets with a variety of measures, including neighborhood festivals that bring residents together and help merchants connect with residents.

On a recent Sunday, people flocked to a three-block area on San Bruno Avenue in the Portola neighborhood. Kids played carnival games and crowded around a petting zoo at one end, while teenagers strapped on sumo wrestling outfits at the other and laughed as they battled it out on a large mat. In the middle of the fair, 4-year-old Derick Jiang watched, transfixed, as a vendor spun pink cotton candy onto a stick.

"It's good for kids," said Derick's mother, Helen Jiang, after she paid for the snack.

"They're having a lot of fun."

Community organizers said it runs deeper than that. Stronger commercial corridors help bring people together and make better, safer neighborhoods. Visitacion Valley attracted thousands of people to its third annual festival on Sept. 14, said resident Russel Morine, who also owns the Joe Leland coffee shop on the neighborhood's main drag, Leland Avenue.

"There was nothing like this in the neighborhood before, where people could just come out and have a good time," Morine said. "It's a safe place that people can bring their kids and have fun. ... More and more people come every year."

In all cases, the work started at the grassroots level, but has been assisted through grants and staffing secured by a national nonprofit, the Local Initiatives Support Coalition, Supervisors Sophie Maxwell and Gerardo Sandoval and Mayor Gavin Newsom's office.

There are now nine commercial corridors involved in the effort, called the San Francisco Neighborhood Marketplace Initiative, which offers money and support to areas where property owners don't have the money or the will to create community benefit districts, in which property owners tax themselves to pay for street improvements.

In the Excelsior, the partnership has helped attract 30 new businesses, including a furniture store that moved into the empty Mission Street Woolworth's, which had been blamed for much of the blight on this now-thriving commercial corridor. That building will soon be redeveloped as a mixed-use project with retail and housing.

In the Portola, San Bruno Avenue has received new trees and plants, utility lines have been buried, new lampposts were erected, and a dilapidated library building got a new facade.

In Visitacion Valley, a nearly abandoned commercial strip has come to life with the new coffee shop, taquerias, produce stores and other retailers. And in the OMI, the initiative meant facade improvements on run-down properties, and helped bring in locally owned businesses such as San Francisco Meats & Delicatessen.

In all of these neighborhoods, residents also credit the program with bringing together the varied cultural and economic communities that have historically been estranged.

"It's very powerful to see what happens when neighborhood initiatives join up with institutional resources like the city and LISC," said Amy Cohen, of the mayor's office of economic and workforce development. "It's not like neighborhoods are told what to do - they're asked what they want to do and we connect them with the money and people at City Hall who can get things done."

The festivals, she said, give neighborhoods an identity and hopefully help draw residents back to local merchants throughout the year. It also might help the rest of the city remember these forgotten neighborhoods, said Cristy Johnson of the Excelsior Action Group, the organization that puts on the Excelsior Festival.

"Most city maps stop at Cesar Chavez Street," she said. "We want to let people know there's something here for them on Mission Street. We want to bring back the vibrancy."

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