Community Analysis of
Lake Forest, California

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Lake Forest Community Analysis

Introduction

I have lived in different cities across Orange County California for nearly eight years, but recently I became a homeowner in Lake Forest, a town I knew very little about before purchasing property. Much of Orange County looks like the suburbs, with very few skyscraper buildings, public transportation, or walkable neighborhoods, but there is a population and industrial zoning comparable to more metropolitan areas. Orange County itself is home to professional sports teams like the Anaheim Ducks and Angels, Disneyland Resort, and an airport. However, it remains fairly under the radar compared to its neighbors Los Angeles and San Diego, despite being similarly populated.

As with many suburban communities, Lake Forest benefits greatly from institutions like the public library. Within the zip code range there are two branches of the Orange County Public Libraries. There are no large colleges or universities within the region to serve as academic hubs, so the El Toro and Foothill Ranch branches are the main source of informational centers within the city.

The mission statement of the city is: "The City of Lake Forest is committed to ensure an optimal quality of life for its community by providing innovative, effective and efficient services" and the vision statement is: "Lake Forest will continue to be a safe, attractive and healthy community in which to live, worship, work and play. Our diverse community will foster the active involvement of its citizenry and businesses, and reflect a distinctive, suburban identity that relies upon an established image of lakes, creeks, forests, and open space." (*Community*, 2022).

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Lake Forest Geography and History

        The city of Lake Forest, California is a suburban area within southern Orange County with a population of over 85,000 (United States Census Bureau, 2022). It is approximately 18 square miles large (30 Interesting Facts, 2022). It is surrounded by similar cities, directly south of Irvine, one of the business hubs within the county. The entire county has approximately three million residents. It is located between two of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States: Los Angeles and San Diego. Last year they celebrated their 30th anniversary of cityhood, previously being two separate areas of Foothill Ranch and El Toro (*30th anniversary*, 2022). At an elevation of 394 ft above sea level it encompasses the best of both a coastal town and a mountainous region. The city is nestled by the Saddleback Valley mountains to the northeast, and is nine miles from the picturesque Laguna coast (*Visitor Information*, 2022).

        The city prides itself on having the "charm of a small community with the convenience of a large metropolitan city" *(City of Lake Forest, 2022)*. The area began as an agricultural hub known as El Toro in the 1800s growing apricots, beans, grapes, citrus, and olives (*City of Lake Forest*, 2022). The opening of the marine base in the 1940s led to an increase in population in the area. The surrounding area had a suburban home boom to accommodate for the soldiers and their families, making up the community we know today. In the 1990s the base was closed and the land again was transformed into Orange County Great Park, just as Lake Forest was establishing itself as a city. It was named "Lake Forest" after the tall eucalyptus trees and man-made lakes (*City of Lake Forest*, 2022). In 1991 the population was over 54,000. More neighborhoods annexed themselves to Lake Forest in the years since including Portola Hills and Foothill Ranch in 2000 (*30 Interesting Facts*, 2022). Subdivisions continued to spring up,

bringing the total population today to over 87,000 (*30 Interesting Facts*, 2022). The city slogan

is "remember the past, challenge the future." (*New Residents*, 2022).

Being in such favorable weather conditions, much of Lake Forest's offerings involve the

outdoors, especially parks which make up 20% of the land (*The Leaflet*, 2022). Other significant

parts of Lake Forest include Etnies Skatepark, the largest staffed public skatepark in North

America, which receives about 60,000 visitors each year, which would fill the entire Angel

Stadium nearby (*30 Interesting Facts*, 2022). In addition to the skate park there are 31 other

parks in the area, three of which are ADA accessible. More than three quarters of residents in

the city live within a ten minute walk to a park (*The Leaflet,* 2022). In 2019 the City Civic

Center was completed with zero debt, which includes a community center, senior center,

performing arts and council chamber, and city hall (*City of Lake Forest*, 2022). The largest event

in the community is the Fourth of July parade which occured every year except 2020 and

2021 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic (30 Interesting Facts, 2022). This year's event held

14,000+ guests and 72 parade entries (*The Leaflet,* 2022).

Politics

Lake Forest is currently part of California's 45th congressional district, which makes up

part of southern Orange County and east Los Angeles. As of 2019 Katie Porter has represented

this district in the United States Senate, the first Democratic representative of the area. For state

government the area is also a mix of Republican and Democratic representatives. Dave Min

(Democrat), is the state senate representative for the 37th district, who was also the first

Democrat in over thirty years since the district has represented this region. Steven Choi

(Republican) is the state assembly representative of the 67th assembly district, a Republican held

seat since the 90s when it was redistricted to this region of Orange County.

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The community is politically purple, switching between voting for Democratic and Republican candidates in national and state elections. In both of the most recent presidential elections the Democratic candidates (Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton in 2020 and 2016 respectively) won out over Donald Trump. Elections for California governor typically go to the Republican candidate.

Local government is made up of a city council, a mayor and mayor pro tem. The public elects the five council members to four year terms, and they select the mayor and mayor pro tems among themselves. Each member represents one district in the city and heads specific committees and boards among the city government. The current mayor is Robert Pequeno, who was elected in 2020 after retiring from being the local sergeant in the Sheriff's department. Councilmembers work for a monthly stipend and participate on the local boards and committees on a weekly or monthly basis (*Councilmembers*, 2022)

Community Demographics and Culture

The community of Lake Forest varies in age and ethnicity. Nearly ⅔ are white only (64%), with the second largest ethnic group being Hispanics (26%), 14% are Asian only, 8% are mixed race, and 2% are Black (Social Explorer, 2022). Minors make up 20% of the population: with 6% being 0-5 years old, 5% being 5-9 years old, 6% being 10-14 years old, and 5% being 15-17 years old (Social Explorer, 2022). Young adults 18-34 years old make up 23% of the population, adults 35-64 years old are 41%, and 16% are 65 or older (Social Explorer, 2022). More than half of residents are female (52%) and 28% are non-family households (Social Explorer, 2022). The median household income is $108,838, significantly higher than the California average of $84,907 (ESRI data, 2022).

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The majority language among residents is English, with 88% of the population speaking English at home, 67% speaking only English. However, there is diversity in languages as well with 17% speaking Spanish, 11% speaking an Asian or Pacific Islander language, and 5% speaking another language (United States Census Bureau, 2022). The percentage that are foreign-born is also slightly higher than the California average, with 28% being born abroad. Among those over half are naturalized US citizens (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Despite the city's military origins, the amount of veterans and servicepeople falls slightly below California average with 3.1% being veterans, and the vast majority of those (92%) being male (United States Census Bureau, 2022).

ESRI defines the top tapestry segmentations as: 37% Enterprising professionals, 20% Savvy Suburbanites, and 12% Pleasantville. Enterprising professionals have a median age of 35, a household size of 2.5 and are seen as the "up-and-comers" climbing the corporate ladder, who are known to rent housing and live in lower-density neighborhoods of the metro areas. Savvy suburbanites are "well educated, well read, and well capitalized." They have a median age of 45, and a household size of 2.85 as their adult children frequently live at home still. Pleasantville, are those who are the picture of "prosperous domesticity," living in older housing and move less frequently than any other market. They have a median age of 43 and a household size of 2.88 (ESRI data, 2022).

The recently finished City Civic Center provides many services to the community, with a large swath of programs available for pre-K children and senior citizens. There is a city publication called *The Leaflet* published on a seasonal basis that serves as a city newsletter and a recreational events guide.

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One of the bigger public institutions in the city is called The Clubhouse, a free offering of a variety of activities including craft classes, wellness lectures, a book club, game tournaments, computer classes, movies and more. These all take place in the City Civic Center in the Clubhouse building. There are also events like weekly bingo and bunco nights that take place free of charge.

The Civic Center also has a variety of recreation classes for Pre-K and School aged children. Most involve music lessons or physical activity, such as dance, gymnastics, or sports. They typically range in cost from $100-300 for five sessions, depending on the program and season (*The Leaflet*, 2022).

There are several city sponsored volunteer groups: Volunteers in Parks, Sheriff's Team of Active Retired Seniors, Explorer Post 449. Orange County Animal Care Volunteers, as well as opportunities to do outreach with the senior program and the teen program. Volunteers in Parks aligns with the city's aims to have polished and usable public parks by conducting quarterly surveys of each of the 32 parks in the city to maintain their quality and assure safety in the area (*Volunteers in Parks*, 2022). Explorer Post 449 program is for youth ages 14 through 20 who are looking to explore the law enforcement field, receiving leadership training, administrative duties, community services, first-aid, and competitions (*Explorer Post 449*, 2022).

Like much of Orange County one pertinent issue of the area is homelessness. The city employs a full-time Sheriff's Deputy as a Homeless Liaison Officer, as well as partners with the Mercy House to help the unhoused population. (*Homeless Resources*, 2022).

Most of the existing programs and events for this community are for young children and seniors. However, the largest age cohort is adults aged 18-34, who have very little outreach designed for them. Our institution should aim to serve this subcommunity, whose only existing

programs revolve around the sport of pickleball (*The Leaflet*, 2022). There are also a lack of

options for languages other than English which make up a large proportion of the population.

Programs designed for foreign-born adults specifically are not in existence.

One of the largest barriers to reaching this audience is the anxiety that they will be asked

for citizenship status when registering or joining an event, with the ultimate fear of it resulting in

deportation (Velez, 2020). Any programming for this group must be made abundantly clear that

it is a safe place regardless of immigration status and seeking assistance will not lead to harm.

An interview study showed that the main priorities among Hispanic and Spanish speaking

respondents was to "provide their children with a good education." The quantitative version of

this study reinforced that finding, with 58% of respondents saying that helping their children

with homework was their main daily priority, followed by concerns with spending time with

family (39%) and work (28%) (Velez, 2020). Programs that could benefit them include: 1)

Spanish/Bilingual story time; 2) Reading Buddies; 3) Homework help; 4) ESL classes; 5)

English Conversation Club; and 6) Workshops in Spanish for parents, like Active Reading or

Reading Comprehension. (Velez, 2020). There is currently a Spanish/Bilingual storytime offered

2-3 times per month at the El Toro Branch Library, and once a month there is an ESL

conversation class.

Conclusion

Other sources of information that would be helpful for this analysis would be deeper

demographic information, such as sexuality, religions, gender identity, and specific languages

spoken. The census does not delve into these aspects of profiles that would contribute to

coloring the personality and interests of this community. I am particularly interested in creating

a program that would benefit queer youth, but it is difficult to size this audience and assume their

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needs. In order to get approval for such a program one would need to argue the impact it would

have, which is very difficult to accomplish without knowing how large the group is. Suburban

change has already marked shifts in ethnocultural and socio-economic statuses, but partially due

to being removed from the census sexuality continues to be unaddressed, encouraging

decision-makers to rely on heteronormativity as they work in the community (Podmore and Bain,

2021).

Other polling data shows that roughly 10% of the population falls somewhere under the

LGBTQAI+ umbrella, which would translate to about 7,000 residents within the community.

Those numbers tend to be higher for younger cohorts, which also make up a large part of Lake

Forest (43% are under 35) (Social Explorer, 2022). A program designed for queer youth could

impact up to 2,000-3,000 residents. The current population under five years is about 5%, or

3.5k, and there are dozens of programs offered to pre-K children on a yearly basis, so there

would definitely be demand for additional programs for a similarly sized demographic.

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