

METRO'S MELTING POT Struggling with ethnic change Chamblee and Doraville face immigrant tide

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Body

Chamblee officials don't want a DeKalb County health clinic in their city. They say a government-run clinic would reduce the amount of taxes the city collects.

In next-door **Doraville**, the mayor and City Council are fighting a DeKalb Chamber of Commerce redevelopment project along Buford Highway. Why object to more businesses on the heels of a recession?

Doraville leaders don't like plans for the International Village, as it's called, that would allow residences to be built above street-level shops.

"That's just not our way of life here," said **Doraville** Vice Mayor Lamar Lang. "We're basically Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians. We don't believe in that."

Beneath both community disputes flows the same undercurrent: the continuing **struggle** to adapt to - and in some cases, fight against - a **tide** of **immigrants** who have transformed the two former blue-collar, predominantly white cities into the most ethnically diverse area in Georgia.

It's not a new development: The 1990 census showed that the number of Asian residents in the area had increased 250 percent in 10 years. The Latino population jumped 150 percent.

As a result, 25 languages are spoken within a five-mile area. Whites are no longer in the majority in **Chamblee**, although they still make up 70 percent of **Doraville's** population.

What is new are the successes and failures experienced by residents and officials in coming to grips with radical **change** - and the suspicion that clouds every event, on both sides.

"The political and social leaders are realistically not prepared mentally for those **changes**," said Mexican Consul General Teodoro Maus, who often acts as an intermediary for the Latino community in Georgia. "They see it as aggression into their space, their way of life, rather than a benefit. There's no real leadership to say, 'Let's take advantage of what's going on and let's build on it.' "

Political leaders counter that they're doing just fine, considering the huge challenges they **face** - both from within and without.

"Quit painting us with a redneck brush," said **Chamblee** Councilman Don Biles. "We're pretty progressive. I don't think we're pulling back from the **change**."

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Chamblee's image suffered a setback last year, when some city officials joked at a council meeting about setting bear traps to catch day laborers so they could be sent back to Mexico. Latino leaders protested loudly, and state and federal officials intervened to calm the tensions.

But **Chamblee** officials felt they were making strides seven months ago when they hired George Rodriguez as the town's first city manager. Rodriguez, a native of Puerto Rico, arrived amid expectations that he could address the concerns of Spanish-speaking residents who make up a quarter of **Chamblee**'s population.

But Rodriguez was fired last month, in part for exceeding his authority. One complaint was that he made room for a Spanish-speaking officer on the **Chamblee** police force without City Council approval. Councilmen also objected to a private charge he put on his city credit card.

The ousted city manager says the five white men on the council fired him because of **ethnic** prejudice.

"Let's be honest here," Rodriguez said. "I'm not an Anglo. An Anglo would have gotten a better shot at it. There was no tolerance because I'm not one of them."

Many in the Latino community, including Mundo Hispanico, the largest Spanish newspaper in Georgia, described Rodriguez's dismissal as an internal matter caused by mistakes and misunderstandings on both sides. The Spanish-speaking police officer remains on the force.

Motives questioned

Chamblee's Latino residents remain suspicious of opposition to the North DeKalb Medical Center. City officials say handing the tract over to the county would take more property off **Chamblee**'s tax rolls.

But of the \$ 2.4 million **Chamblee** collected in taxes for fiscal 1992, only \$ 3,572 - 0.1 percent - came from the parcel on which the county wants to build the clinic.

At worst, many community leaders say that behind the opposition to the clinic lies an effort to discourage poor people - and the majority of **immigrants** in the region are employed in low-paying jobs - from settling in the area.

At best, they say, it is an example of how the lack of communication can conjure images of close-mindedness.

"If [**Chamblee** councilmen] think those are not the places these clinics should go, then they should sit down with county officials and find a place," said Maritza Keen, executive director of the local Latin American Association. "You just don't say no, because then it sounds like you just don't want them there."

Feelings are more overt in the case of the International Village.

"The International Village wanted us to go after low-rent housing to attract more **immigrants**," said Lang, the **Doraville** vice mayor. "Why would we want to attract more **immigrants** when we got all we want? We got plenty. We got enough to go around. If you want any in your neighborhood, we'll send you some."

DeKalb County Commissioner Elaine Boyer's district includes both cities. Beneath the hot rhetoric, she sees opposition to the clinic and the International Village as a control issue.

"I don't think they're trying to stop it," she said. "They're saying, 'Wait a minute. Maybe this is moving too fast. We live here. Don't tell us how it's going to be done. We want input.'"

"When you have **change** and you feel like you're losing control, that's no good," Boyer said.

But it's not all bad news and strife in the twin cities along Buford Highway.

Asian Square, a 25-store, \$ 5 million plaza in **Doraville**, opened last week. The Asian-owned Summit National Bank has broken ground on an 18,000- square-foot, three-story building in **Chamblee**. And Georgia's first Vietnamese-developed shopping center is scheduled to open on Buford Highway later this month.

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Some non-native business leaders say they understand how rapid **change** can cause tensions.

"Atlanta is like any city," said Pin Pin Chau, the Chinese-born and Yale-educated president and chief executive officer of Summit Bank. "There are people who look at **change** as an opportunity. 'Let's prosper together,' they say. There are other people who say, 'I don't know if I want this **change**.'"

"I look at it as natural. It's human nature. Part of us wants to explore and grow and part of us wants to stay the same."

Staff writer Tim Fay contributed to this article.

Graphic

MAP & Chart: A map of **Chamblee** and **Doraville** shows the location of an Asian Square shopping center, Summit National Bank and the proposed North DeKalb Health Center site. /Staff **Chamblee** Population: 7,668 White (non-Hispanic): 45% Black: 19% Hispanic: 24% Asian: 12% **Doraville** Population: 7,626 White (non-Hispanic): 70% Black: 19% Hispanic: 9% Asian: 7% Georgia Population: 6,478,216 White (non-Hispanic): 71% Black: 27% Hispanic: 2% Asian: 1% Source: 1990 census Color Photo: Onlookers enjoy entertainment at the recent opening of Asian Square, a 25-store, \$ 5 million plaza in **Doraville**, which is part of a five-mile area in which 25 languages are spoken. / Nick Arroyo / Staff Color Photo: in Pin Chau, the Chinese-born and Yale-educated president and chief executive officer of Summit Bank, says the tensions generated by rapid **change** in the area are "human nature." / Dianne Laakso / Staff Color Photo: George Rodriguez, fired as city manager, says he would have gotten more tolerance as an Anglo. Many in the Latino community say both sides share the blame. / Kimberly Smith / Staff

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