

# MANAGING in a City of CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

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*During ICMA's Pacific Rim Symposium, held in Hawaii, January 21-24, 1991, the author delivered an address on the effects of changing demographics on local government service delivery.*

**I**n the past two decades countries in the Pacific Rim have faced changes in population makeup. These changes affect the manner in which local government delivers services. We have become a small world after all. People are moving from area to area, country to country, culture to culture. Customs and trends are no longer restricted to a single country—just take a look at the proliferation of fast-food restaurants. Countries are changing from agriculture-based societies to industrial ones. Increasingly, nations must interact and rely upon one another to ensure economic survival. Traditional nuclear and extended families are being modified as new generations take on universal, or some may say "Western," concepts. People are living longer. Each change in the makeup of our communities, each change in the makeup of the people we serve, has an affect on what local managers will have to deal with in the coming years.

These observations arise from a Southern California perspective, and from my experience in a city that has changed from a 95 percent Caucasian population to one that is 35 percent Asian in less than 10 years. In many cases, the situations will be different in other communities.

Population flowing to countries around the Pacific Rim generally has been either individuals who are voluntarily immigrating for eco-

nomie and social betterment or those who are refugees escaping political or social dangers. Most refugee immigration took place in the 1970s, a result of the Vietnam War and the consequent disruptions in Southeast Asia. In the southern part of the United States, there is still a major immigration flow from Central and South America. These are people avoiding political and social dangers in their own countries. During the 1980s, immigration by Taiwanese and natives of Hong Kong increased as people looked for new economic opportunities, and an improvement in their social status, and sought to avoid the uncertainty of 1997. The resultant mixture of uneducated and poor, as well as highly educated, skilled, and financially well-off new populations has added to the challenges facing our cities.

## **Today's New Arrivals: An Increasing Diversity**

Delivery of services has not been easy since the demographics of migration are changed. In the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, most immigration traditionally has come from European countries. Only in recent decades has there been an increasing number of Latin American and Asian immigrants. For these new groups, there has been no strong cultural, language, and social support group in place for a number of generations, as was the case for earlier immigrations.

As a result, the assimilation effort has become harder for local government. For example, in the United States all major cities that were initial settlement points for immigrants had their own "Little Italy" or "Polish Town." New arrivals of all social and economic strata would be taken in by residents from the same country and taught American language and customs. These support groups found work for the new arrivals, whether through business or the political spoils system. Customs generally were not that different from those of the immigrant's native land, and the newcomers conformed to them with little difficulty. Government could rely on this informal structure to assure that local laws, regulations, and customs were adhered to. It must be noted that the physical similarity of these immigrants to the majority population made assimilation easier.

Now we are facing a different situation. Pacific Rim countries are becoming increasingly diverse and are no longer homogeneous societies. The new cultures and customs that are brought into our societies often conflict with local traditions. Tensions rise between "native residents," and those currently in established power, and these new arrivals to our community. The differences and the tensions, if not properly addressed, make managing local government an increasing challenge. Here are a few examples of such challenges.

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One of the first issues a local government manager faces is identifying the service needs of the community. This is a challenge simply from the perspective of talking with the people we serve. The sheer number of languages, dialects, and cultures among the Asian and Latin nations makes it difficult to have translators and programs to assist in identification of service needs and in their delivery. As an example, more than 170 languages and dialects are spoken in the Los Angeles City school system. Under these circumstances, no one school can help all its potential students. As in education, language is a critical element in local government's effort to provide services. The slightest slip in language can cause a major problem for a manager. Take, for example, the California city that had an

unexpected end to its promotional campaign for a new library. The word "Welcome" on a sign had been translated in a Philippino dialect to read "You are circumcised." Not quite the message intended. That incident was just an embarrassment to the local officials. But in health, safety, and law enforcement situations, the inability to communicate can lead to disastrous results.

### **Cultural Differences Can Cause Conflict**

Differences in cultural practices may also create problems for local officials. As an example, the Chinese folk medicine custom of "coinage" to break a fever can be viewed as child abuse by the uninformed. While a public interest in the protection of children is supported by everyone, it is a very difficult experience for all parties involved when a family is brought before the justice system for what they view as helping their child. Improperly handled, such a situation can produce long-term harmful results for a community. It can create a lack of trust in and respect for local officials and programs.

Conflicts with local building requirements can result from differing cultural and religious views. San Marino, California, had problems with residents cutting down city trees in parkways when they were immediately in front of the doorway. Or, some residents were adjusting the alignment of doors to a more favorable direction without obtaining city permits. Long-time residents viewed these practices as destroying the traditional ambience of the city. Differences in architectural styles created distress among neighbors who viewed the size and design of new buildings as "reducing the value of their homes." The San Marino area has coined the phrase "mansionization" to reflect the desire of Asian residents to construct large homes that overwhelm surrounding buildings in both size and design. For Asians, this is a means of accommodating their extended families and a reaction to the limited housing space available to them in their native countries. The resulting conflict caused the city to enact increasingly restrictive building codes that affected everyone, often adversely.

Commercial development also has been affected, when restrictions have been imposed on signs placed on commercial buildings. In communities with large Asian populations, businesses use signs with characters rather than the Roman alphabet as a means of identifying their services for immigrants who do not read English. People of European and Latin backgrounds tend to view this change in the visual aspects of a street as a deterioration of the commercial areas, because it does

not conform with the traditional. Cities have tried to prevent the signs' proliferation with restrictions on content, only to be sued on First Amendment and freedom of speech grounds. In cities in which lawsuits have been filed and the cities have lost, resentment between the culture groups has grown. Local managers have been left in the middle, as usual, to develop building standards that will be acceptable to both groups.

Managing also becomes difficult when the different cultures have different views of government and its role. For some from countries where governments are repressive, there is fear of involvement with a government authority. This manifests itself in not seeking assistance or in refusing to cooperate, even with police in reporting and prevention of crimes. With certain crimes, including violent gang-related activity, the victims do not report the crime, not only for fear of reprisal, but also because it may have been an accepted practice in their native country. Other cultural groups then view the increase of crime in the community as an indication of a lack of concern for the safety of others, and tensions rise.

Many Latin American and Asian cultures traditionally are family-centered, with extended families living in one home. The family provides the social and economic support for individuals rather than relying on various government agencies. The elderly are looked after by their children, not in nursing homes; jobs are provided by family and relatives, not for training programs; and children are expected to contribute free time to the family business, not to school activities.

These family-centered traditions and views of government can result in less participation in local government activities. On the local scene, large concentrations of immigrant populations often are under-represented in the political arena. In California, this has resulted in a number of lawsuits demanding changes in the method of electing local officials. The suits seek to end "at-large" elections and establish districts encompassing the concentrations of ethnic groups. However, while the ethnic group may include large numbers of people, they generally are not citizens, nor do they participate in the election process. As ethnic groups gain political representation, there is a resulting desire to "make up for lost time" and increase service delivery to a specific segment of the city. With dwindling resources, this means others get service cuts, which they do not like. Just who your councilmembers represent when they request services from the city manager in these situations can be confusing at worst and unclear at best.

Among the new arrivals, there is initial

hesitancy to become a part of local government. It is hard for cities to recruit employees from some ethnic groups in any profession other than those viewed as traditionally acceptable. Cities in Southern California find it difficult to hire qualified Asians for police departments. Law enforcement is not viewed as a desirable profession in some of the cultures, and standards for residency and language skills also may be deterrents for newly arrived citizens. Not having the cultural/racial diversity of the community represented in a police department tends to exacerbate the distrust mentioned above. In other positions, there are no role models for new immigrants



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to follow, or the positions are not acceptable within a culture. For example, a woman in a highly visible management position is not a part of the traditional Japanese culture. Usually, it will take a few generations before significant inroads are made in these areas. There is also a racial prejudice on both sides of the employment equation which informally assigns individuals to certain positions. Unfortunately, in many cities there remains the view that Latinos make good manual workers, Japanese are engineers, and Chinese are accountants. Until these prejudices are abandoned, it can be difficult for local managers to build a local workforce that fully reflects the changing demographics of the community.

These problems that result from changing cultural and racial demographics should be viewed as new challenges and opportunities for local government managers in preparing new approaches for service delivery.

### **Building Understanding and Cooperation**

The most important aspect of management's approach to the new demographics will be to discuss and understand the issues, not to con-

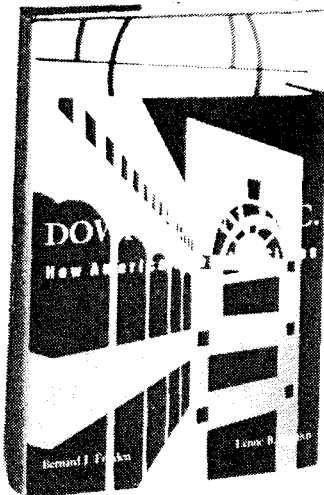
front. While it is easier to have programs in which new residents are expected to conform with existing rules and procedures, the potential for the development of adversarial relations will not work to the long-term welfare of the community. Diversity can be a benefit to a city if it is properly integrated into current programs. To accomplish this goal, managers must be familiar with the traditions and cultures of their new residents. While you do not have to become immersed in a new lifestyle, reading books on the various cultures in your community or attending programs will give you a sense of the tradition of the culture. You will learn the "why" behind some of the actions the members of the group take. Do not criticize what a culture does because it is contrary to what your norms may be. In San Marino, staff members came to understand the Chinese belief that having an unobstructed entry into one's home insures good fortune. Then, appropriate education steps could be taken to deal with city codes prohibiting the cutting down of trees. The end result was a policy that allowed trees to be removed (which met the concern of the Chinese) while requiring that new trees be planted on the property (meeting the city goal of an urban forest setting).

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Support groups can be a valuable tool for a local official in learning about and working with new cultures. Most ethnic groups have their own social, philanthropic or religious organizations that serve as an education medium for everyone. San Marino has a strong Chinese Club which mails a newsletter, in Chinese, to the Chinese residents, about 500 of the 4,200 families in the city. The Chinese Club has helped the city staff by interpreting new city codes, explaining new procedures and serving as a sounding board for the city manager on the concerns of the Asian community. Something as simple as a monthly lunch with the club's board members has netted positive results. When the city was proposing new commercial sign regulations, which would impact most directly Chinese businesses, the Chinese Club was able to provide the community's views of acceptable standards. It also explained the adopted code to new businesses entering the city. As a result, a broad range of residents and businesses in San Marino supports the sign regulations, while elsewhere lawsuits are being filed against cities throughout the San Gabriel Valley of Los Angeles County. Confrontation was avoided and unified support was developed.

To prevent problems from arising, it also may be helpful to create your own support group. When serious problems arose in the local high school between Asian and Caucasian students, the San Marino City Council established a Human Relations Committee with representatives from the Chinese Club, Japanese Club, city council, schools, churches, and major civic organizations. The committee met on a regular basis in an informal setting to discuss growing problems in the community. Participants understood that all specific cases discussed in the meetings would be held in the strictest confidence. The group helped resolve the school problems. Within the past year, a continuous dialogue between the city's police department and the committee helped prevent the vandalism of a Chinese business from escalating into a major legal and social problem for the city.

The Human Relations Committee also served as a cultural integration tool for all residents. The committee sponsored "Dinners for Eight." Two Asian couples would have dinner with two Caucasian couples at one of the couples' homes. This informal social interaction has formed many strong friendships and has provided an opportunity for one-on-one cultural exchanges. The dinners served as the starting point for discussions on various topics of local concern. They have resulted in Chinese programs being incorporated in city recreation activities and city officials being invited to many of the social events of the

Asian community. The variety of informal gatherings has served as one of the most effective tools in identifying problems early, in easing tensions, and in understanding each other's position on city programs.

### **More Outreach**

Regardless of the groups in our communities, as local government managers it is incumbent on us to have an outreach program to explain city programs. The ethnic press in your area is a helpful tool. These community-based newspapers are looking for material to print and have a genuine interest in promoting city programs to their readers. Work with the local reporter or editor to have the city's programs covered and explained, and provide information on how people can become involved in government activity. Provide your own education programs. You will find many residents who are willing to donate their time and talent to providing instruction to new residents. The city of Alhambra in California has used residents, city staff, and personnel from private companies to hold orientation programs for new immigrants. Residents hold informal sessions in the native language. They explain the array of government programs available, local code requirements, government structure, and the procedures required to apply for government services such as housing or medical assistance. They help make people feel comfortable about dealing with government officials. San Marino has an informal group of residents who volunteer to serve as interpreters and conflict resolvers when non-English speaking Asians have to deal with the police or fire department. I can assure you that this helps the police officer feel comfortable in the situation as much as it does the resident. And, very important, on a number of occasions it has prevented legal action being taken against the city.

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Each of you can provide examples of how you are dealing with the changing racial and cultural makeup of your cities. I have highlighted the issues that I have faced in the past few years in a demographically changing city. As long as we have an open mind and accept the changes that are taking place, we as managers are ready to face the future. PM