

The Real American Dream

Over the Thanksgiving holiday, millions of us across the country watched in dismay as several individuals vandalized two liquor stores in West Oakland. Those acts of vandalism rekindled a long standing and larger issue in urban areas across the country including Oakland: working class communities are plagued with too many stores which count primarily on liquor sales for income. While the issue is not a new one, the solution will require different communities working together to address this serious problem.

The over saturation of these types of business in Oakland is an issue. However, the placement of these businesses in urban communities was originally identified as an opportunity to realize some part of the "American Dream." In its root, the "American Dream" is the ability to have a secure job, steady income and home for your family. How one achieves the "American Dream" and prosperity is through hard work, courage and determination.

Sometimes woven into the dream is the belief of entrepreneurship, owning a business and becoming self sufficient. I have always been a supporter of the entrepreneurial spirit; I myself have had the opportunity to own several small businesses. I would hope the business owners would work to promote the American Dream across all communities by creating businesses which are community friendly, civic minded and address the needs of the residents thus enhancing the neighborhoods in which we work and live. Assisting stores, which depend heavily on liquor sales in Oakland's communities in finding a diversity of products to sell including healthier foods, is a start.

The unfortunate fact is that there are over 350 liquor stores in the Oakland Area. I am not saying that all of the 350 stores are contributing to the problems plaguing the community. It is important to recognize the ills that infect our communities, increased crime, health problems, alcoholism and substance abuse are the root of the problem. If we are going to genuinely address the issues that led to recent vandalism, we must strategically look at the entire picture. The statistics are disturbing:

- The Alameda County Hospital Council Reports that Oakland has the highest rate of hospitalizations due to alcohol disorder at 33%.

- According to the Alameda County Sheriff's office, statistics show that 1,302 people were booked in Alameda County jails from July 1 through October 31, 2005 for being under the influence of drugs and or alcohol; of that number 515 or 40% of those incidents were from Oakland.
- The Robert C. Maynard Institute of Journalism Education reports that the more liquor stores a community has, the higher the rate of violence. The problem is particularly acute in African-American and Latino neighborhoods.

As we plan for the New Year, it is my hope that as business and community leaders, we will take the liquor store incident as an opportunity to forge new relationships including the Middle Eastern, Asian, and Spanish speaking communities to continue to work together and not divided based on religion, race, or socioeconomic status. Working through the cultural differences to create a healthier community is a goal that I hope we continue to strive for. A diversity of religious leaders, community members and elected officials have taken the initial steps. Yet, addressing this issue will require a comprehensive change in behavior by the entire community.

This brief article is an attempt to encourage stronger community ties across all lines, encourage business owners to be accountable for the products in their stores, and continue to work with leaders that are addressing the over saturation of liquor sales in Oakland. The ultimate responsibility lies with us as individuals. Through these steps hopefully more residents will realize a responsible "American Dream."