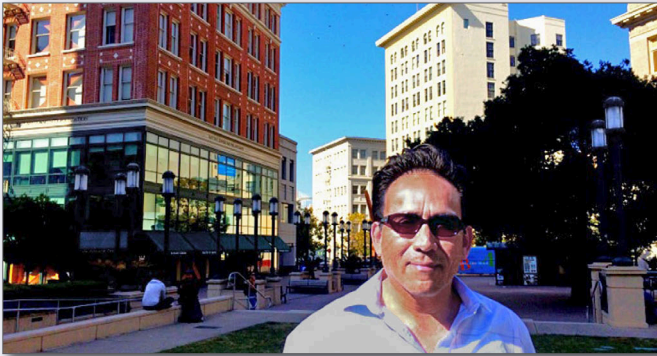


My Oakland

Erika J. Sawyer, AICP, interviews Mike Rivera



Mike Rivera was born in Lima, Peru. As a boy he wandered around the Spanish-Colonial neighborhoods, and that led to his appreciation for historic architecture and living in a dense city. As a teenager, he moved with his family to San Francisco, a place he calls home. Continuing to live in a dense urban environment — and seeing and meeting people from all parts of the world — sparked his interest in urban planning, a profession he loves. Mike currently lives in Oakland and works there as a city planner.

Why did you choose to live and work in Oakland?

Oakland has a great stock of historic homes, warmer weather than San Francisco, an urban environment, and the dynamics for change and growth. Growing up, I felt San Francisco had a lot to offer, but when you're in Oakland and you look across the bay, you feel you're having the best of both cities. I've been amazed by the variety of homes in Oakland — many built in the late 1800s and early 1900s — that give Oakland its character. The homes are charming, and every neighborhood has a story to tell. I don't miss the cold and foggy days across the bay. I look forward to Oakland's weather, which is almost 10 degrees warmer than San Francisco's. That makes it possible to explore the beauty of Oakland's parks, hillside trails, lakes, creeks, and the estuary, any time of year.

What surprises you most about Oakland? Change, and the fact that most people don't want it in their neighborhood. City planners know that this comes with the job, and Oakland is no exception. For the most part, Oaklanders do a good job of accepting change as long as it doesn't affect their well-being.

What do you see as Oakland's strengths? For one, people working together and having the goals and expectations to make Oakland a better place to live. There is a sense of neighborhood and community interest whether a change or a new development is proposed. After all, it's the neighborhood that will be carrying the weight of most changes. It's a win-win when people on all sides participate and work out issues together.

What do you feel is the biggest challenge facing the city? One challenge is downtown Oakland. It was a popular destination-shopping district until the mid 1950s when many residents and major retailers started to move out to newly developed suburbs around the Bay Area.

Another challenge is the absence of new quality retail and entertainment in neighborhood commercial areas. They generate tax revenues for the city and create job opportunities for the local residents. In the last few years, the City has worked with communities and developers to revitalize underserved neighborhoods by creating the Broadway-Valdez and the West Oakland Specific Plans. These plans are designed to attract major retail and high-density residential development to serve the needs of local and regional residents, so they won't have to shop in Emeryville or San Francisco.

While these Specific Plans are underway, the city is getting positive publicity, such as the *New York Times* article listing Oakland as #5 in "The 45 places to go in 2012" (<http://nyti.ms/WRDrjA>), or from social-media bloggers talking about how cool Oakland is. The Oakland Art Murmur, which takes place the first Friday of each month, has also improved the city's image. 1st Fridays offer the best of the arts scene: Galleries in the Uptown District display the best work of creative-minds, with pop-up shops that sell custom-made goods. Also, the influx of trendy restaurants, bars, Internet cafes, and new start-up tech companies has created a vibe that attracts local and regional crowds, making Oakland a bustling city.

What is your favorite local neighborhood? Every neighborhood is distinctive in how it caters to different segments of the population, but I must say, downtown is becoming one of my favorite destinations. It wasn't long after I started to work downtown, in the Oakland Planning Department,

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that I came to appreciate the urban setting. Like any other major city, Oakland has lots of history. We have mid-rise historic buildings, surrounding downtown districts, and hidden streets and alleys. Oakland is promising and has the “nuts and bolts” for new things to happen. But it takes time for development to occur, because everyone has an interest in how the city develops — which is a good thing.

What do you think most surprises others about Oakland? Well, I’m surprised by the mix of people drawn to Oakland and the new trend of arts and crafts people who are leading the maker movement. I’m also surprised by the large number of new restaurants and bars where you can have fun, eat well, and meet interesting people.

Where do you take out-of-town visitors and why?

The Oakland hills are one of my favorite places to take visitors. There are amazing views from the streets — and from the trails you can see Oakland, San Francisco, and other parts of the Bay Area. The hills are a peaceful place to be. The smell of the open air, and being surrounded by nature, add to the tranquility.

Interviewer Erika J. Sawyer, AICP, is a senior planner at Marstel-Day, Oakland. As the firm’s Western Regional Manager, she oversees the Oakland and Oceanside offices and Marstel-Day’s client work in Twentynine Palms. ■